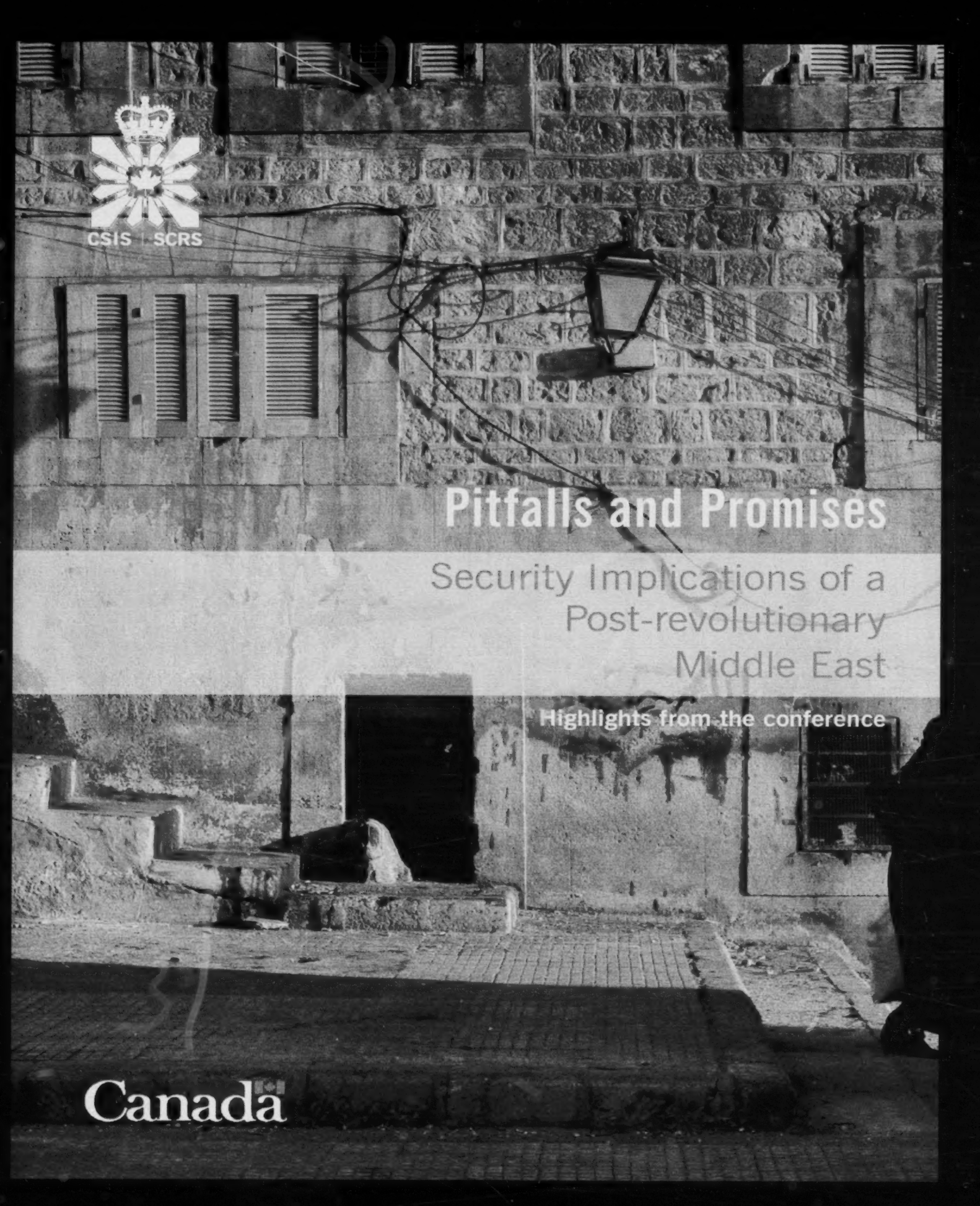
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The conference and its objectives

On 12 and 13 May 2014 the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) hosted a two-day conference on security in the Middle East as part of its Academic Outreach program. Conducted under Chatham House rule, the event provided an opportunity for the presenting specialists and other participants to examine the implications of unrest in Syria and Egypt as it relates to regional stability and security.

The Middle East conference welcomed an impressive roster of researchers from North America, Europe and the Middle East. The papers contained in this conference report reflect the views of those independent scholars and analysts who presented them, not those of CSIS. The Academic Outreach program at CSIS, established in 2008, aims to promote a dialogue between intelligence practitioners and outside experts from a variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds working in universities, think tanks, media outlets, private companies and other research institutions in Canada and abroad. It may be that our invited experts hold ideas or promote findings that conflict with our own views and analysis, yet it is for this reason that there is value in the conversation.

Executive Summary

The 2011 popular uprisings that sought to unseat authoritarian leaders across the Middle East and North Africa have set in motion profound transformations. Where leaders have fallen, in Tunisia, Libya or Egypt, the uprisings have resulted in diverse and divergent outcomes. While Tunisia appears engaged in a contested yet steady process of institutional change, the transitional process in Libya is threatening to collapse under the weight of a fierce power struggle between elites. In Egypt, the first democratically elected Islamist president was removed from power by the country's military with the support of a fragile coalition of secular forces, religious minorities and Salafists. President Morsi was replaced by the former head of the Egyptian armed forces, thus seemingly reverting to the time-honoured pattern of installing the military at the helm of the state. Where regimes have remained in power, as in Syria or Bahrain, the outcomes were also varied. Syria descended into civil war; Bahrain managed to suppress the mobilisation of its Shia population. Elsewhere across the region—as in Iraq, Lebanon or Jordan—populations may not have come together to depose their ruling elites, but the uprisings have (re)-activated societal fault lines.

What do these transformations mean for international security and for Western interests in the region? What are the new vectors of the Middle Eastern security equation and how do they translate into threats and/or opportunities for the West and its allies? To answer these questions, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service hosted on 12-13 May 2014 a conference that sought to identify the pitfalls and promises of the emerging landscape by focusing on the dynamics at play in two pivotal countries of the region: Egypt and Syria. Discussions among participants, generated by presentations delivered by 22 subject matter experts from around the world, yielded several important findings summarised under the following headings:

- Fragmented power and ungoverned spaces
- Polarised societies: a breeding ground for new jihadists
- Blurring the lines between domestic problems and regional struggles
- Threats, interests and constraints: the responses of major powers

Fragmented power and ungoverned spaces

The actors involved in struggles in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere have undergone significant transformations. In Syria, a deeply divided

insurgency has failed to coalesce around a common project. As a multitude of local insurgent groups have attempted to hold territory, they have tried to find strength in numbers, regrouping into coalitions and blocs and tapping into outside sources of support—notably Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, the resulting blocs remain weak and hollow. It is telling, for example, that the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) Jamal Maarouf is also presented as the leader of the Syria Revolutionaries Front (SRF) although it is not clear that he does, in fact, hold that position. Not only are bloc formations such as the Islamic Front (IF) and SRF weak, their emergence has also been accompanied by an increase in inter-rebel conflict, particularly between Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the military's decision to dismantle the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), jail many of its leaders and supporters and deny it a role in the politics and the socioeconomic life of the country, has generated a profound state of confusion and a crisis of leadership in the ranks of the Brotherhood. With most of the movement's leadership in prison or in exile, the party's erstwhile Salafist supporters are attempting to seize the opportunity of its dismemberment to assert their own leadership over Islamists. The resurgence and proliferation of Islamist extremist groups conducting low-level warfare against the state and its agents have translated into recurring attacks against state institutions and figures, particularly in the Sinai where a multitude of Salafist and takfirist groups operate.

Fragmentation is not the preserve of opposition forces. In Syria, the regime has come to resemble the opposition and real power is vested in individuals who control territory, resources and information. State institutions are gutted, various power holders compete and coordinate loosely, and Bashar al-Assad—though his presence provides a veneer of legitimacy—has lost leverage. State institutions have been significantly weakened, even hollowed, in neighbouring countries like Iraq or Lebanon. In Egypt, some argue that the state is disintegrating because its institutions are increasingly autonomous from one another.

The weakening of state institutions and the fragmentation of power increase the probability that "ungoverned spaces" will emerge in the Middle East. While the term refers to spaces over which the state has lost effective control, non-state actors use these territories for other purposes. In areas like the Sinai Peninsula and areas to the north and northeast of Syria not controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PDY) allied with al-Assad, ungoverned spaces border Western allies such as Israel and Turkey.

Polarised societies: a breeding ground for new jihadists

That societies in the Middle East and North Africa are increasingly polarised as a result of the recent struggles is an inescapable conclusion. Polarisation may express itself differently but its depth is equally acute across the region.

In Syria, a movement against an authoritarian regime has morphed into sectarian conflict, as illustrated by the increasing Shia character of Damascus and the fading of the secular opposition in comparison with Sunni Islamist rebel movements. The Syrian civil war has deepened the Sunni-Shia divide in Lebanon with Hizballah fighting alongside the al-Assad regime and the country's Sunni leadership supporting opposing groups. In Iraq, the sectarian politics of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have torn apart the fragile political compact between Sunnis and Shia. Tribal leaders who were the backbone of the Awakening Movement are now allied with ISIL, which now controls large parts of Iraqi and Syrian territory.

Elsewhere, society is divided between Islamist and non-Islamist forces and the polarisation is no less acute. In Egypt, the struggle is cast as an existential threat; the government is intent on destroying the Brotherhood movement whose supporters, in turn, define the state as the enemy. Deliberate polarisation has been used as a strategy for mobilisation, for example when pro-Morsi supporters gathered at the Rabaa al-Adawiyya Mosque in Cairo were branded terrorists and the mosque subsequently stormed. In Tunisia, Salafists have assassinated leftist politicians to deepen the crisis between Ennahda and secular political forces. Since Saudi Arabia decided to ban the Brotherhood and considers it a terrorist organisation, polarisation has become a regional node of conflict.

Torn societies offer breeding grounds for violence. In Egypt, university campuses have become incubators for violence towards the state. The Syrian civil war has revived the fortunes of Al-Qaeda and foreign fighters have flocked to the country where they are acquiring a range of lethal skills honed in an environment of urban warfare. An increasing number of these fighters come from Western countries and could pose a serious security challenge upon their return home. Everywhere across the Arab region, the fall-out of the uprisings of 2011 is increasing the impatience and disgruntlement of Arab youth. Sunni alienation in Lebanon and East Bank protests in Jordan attest to the regional consequences of these dynamics. Even non-Arab neighbours like Turkey are feeling the heat with the Turkish Alawite and Halevi communities radicalised against the ruling

AKP government and increasingly at the forefront of anti-government protests.

Blurring the lines between domestic problems and regional struggles

The changing landscape of the Middle East has blurred the lines between domestic problems and regional struggles. Nowhere is this more evident than in the internationalisation of the Syrian conflict. The interface between domestic politics and the Syrian conflict is also evident in neighbouring countries, as illustrated by the clashes in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli or by the radicalisation of the Turkish Alawite and Halevi communities. Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia perceive the rise of transnational ideological threats—such as the rise of the MB or efforts at democratisation—as existential risks and they have responded by cracking down on dissidents at home. On the other hand, the war in Syria has led a rapprochement between Kurds and Turks. In Jordan, the potential threat posed to the monarchy by East Bank protesters has been defused by developments in Syria.

Regional powers are adjusting their foreign policies to respond to these developments. Having experimented with the role of soft regional power and learnt at its own expense that states in the Middle East need hard power to matter, Turkey is now moving closer to its allies in the West. The occupation of unstable spaces on its border by Islamist extremists and the potential transfer of chemical and sophisticated military materials to non-state armed actors such as Hizballah have prompted Israel to build up its deterrent capability while trying not to get drawn into the conflict. For their parts, Saudis have also privileged containment to address threats emanating from Iraq. But they have elected to react to developments in Syria to counter Iranian influence while supporting General al-Sisi in Egypt to create strategic depth against Tehran. Much like Israel, Saudi Arabia would prefer the devil it knows, in the form of authoritarian regimes back in the saddle, to the one it does not. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and Israel continue to see Iran as the major threat in the region but this commonality of interests has not resulted in collaboration. Increased jihadism is a by-product of the Saudi response whereas Israeli officials have opened channels of communication with groups opposing Jabhat al-Nusra in southern Syria.

Threats, interests and constraints: the responses of major powers

As major powers position themselves vis-à-vis the changing Middle Eastern landscape, domestic politics in the United States, Russia and

China affect the manner in which all three—albeit differently—assess the threats emanating from the region.

Washington's outlook is shaped by structural domestic realities: the US government is financially constrained; Iraq exhausted the military; and public opinion is overwhelmingly in favour of a retrenchment strategy. Pragmatism has become the name of the game with the US administration carefully weighing its options and ruthlessly prioritising what can and cannot be done, hence the priority given to a resolution of the Iranian nuclear issue as compared with relative inaction regarding Egypt and limited engagement on Syria. Likewise, Russia's policy in the Middle East is not about the region per se. Rather, it seeks to foster an international environment where intervention in the affairs of sovereign states becomes impossible (except with regards to former Soviet republics) and the Russian system of political governance can endure. Russia is slated to have a Muslim majority population in fifty years. From this perspective, Moscow's most important concern regarding the Middle East is the rise of jihadism. The Russian mindset draws clear connections between Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, radicalism in Chechnya and the US. Thus, Russia fears a power vacuum in Iraq and Syria and it shares Israel's concerns about jihadism. China, for its part, is driven by its reliance on energy supplies from the Middle East. But Sino-American relations remain at the core of Chinese strategic thinking and Beijing is less interested in understanding the societies of a troublesome region than in finding ways to balance its energy needs with the desire to avoid conflict with the United States.

Domestically driven threat assessments coupled with structural constraints result in what may appear to be inconsistent views on the part of external powers. The United States deals with Iran differently depending on whether the issue at hand concerns Tehran's nuclear program talks or the Syrian conflict. Russia's approach to Syria may appear opportunistic but reflects an attempt to maintain a clear distinction between internal and external affairs. As for China, which shares Iran's scepticism about the US and has a long history of ties with the Persian Empire, it nevertheless pays more attention to Saudi Arabia, Beijing's preferred trading partner in the region.

Only when threats emerging from the Middle East are defined as existential or when they affect the core interests of major powers could the structural constraints on, particularly Western, intervention be suspended allowing for more visible and decisive strategic responses. The disruption of commodity production in Libya and Iraq and the threat of oil-producing regions falling into jihadist hands may provide just such a

context. This may also provide additional incentives to find a deal on the Iranian nuclear file.

Security Implications of a Post-Revolutionary Middle East

The State of the Syrian Armed Opposition

The Syrian uprising has grown into a uniquely complex insurgency. Politically, a "national" narrative of struggle against the al-Assad regime has dominated, but the rebel militias began as local units, are often geographically restricted, and seem unable to shed their parochial interests. As the war has dragged on, they have been drawn into the orbit of regional and international actors who have supplied funds and weapons and encouraged unification attempts among the rebels—but rarely have they coordinated these efforts.

The anti-Assad insurgency remains divided into hundreds of groups drawn from the Sunni Arab population, even as the Kurdish community has also militarised for other purposes. By late 2012, Islamist ideologies were predominant within the Sunni Arab mainstream of the rebellion. Hard-line Salafist-jihadism was a strong force, though by no means dominant. In 2013, international actors in the Gulf and the West sought to generate counter-movements by arming non-ideological groups and "soft Islamists" and attaching them to foreign-backed secular figures in the new Free Syrian Army leadership and the exiled opposition.

By late 2013, the insurgency had begun to coalesce into larger blocs. Regional developments—such as the US-Russian chemical arms deal of September 2013, the subsequent bet on the Geneva II peace process, and the ups and downs of the Saudi-Qatari rivalry—seemingly affected funding streams into Syria, and therefore also rebel behaviour. In particular, increased spending by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates seems to have enabled a belated resurgence of groups willing to distance themselves from militant Salafism.

Syria's insurgent groups cannot be neatly categorised, as many alliances overlap and groups split and merge for obscure reasons. Public ideological statements tend to be both unclear and opportunistic. However, insurgent factions can perhaps be placed along a political-allegiance spectrum ranging from the FSA-type factions, that are most closely influenced by foreign governments, to the opposite end with fully independent and even terrorist-listed groups.

Syrian insurgent groups

The Free Syrian Army (FSA): The "FSA" label should be used with caution. Here, it refers to a "network of networks" created at a conference in Antalya, Turkey, in December 2012. This conference set up institutions

that have since served as a Syrian politico-military superstructure for international funding channels involving the Gulf States, Turkey, the United States, and other countries.

The FSA's leadership-in-exile split in January 2014, with the FSA Supreme Military Council electing Brig. Gen. Abdel-Ilah al-Bashir al-Noeimi as the new head of the FSA General Staff, its executive leadership. This move was backed by the National Coalition and the Interim Government, that is, the internationally approved political opposition. However, the original Chief of the General Staff, Lt. Gen. Salim Idriss, refused to resign and this led to a split in the FSA leadership.

The international networks underpinning the FSA seem to fuel much of the insurgency, but only a minority of factions seem to be fully co-opted by their sponsors and/or consistently acknowledge FSA institutions. These include:

- The Syria Revolutionaries' Front, declared in December 2013 by mostly non-ideological FSA groups linked to Saudi Arabia, heavily promoted and funded since then;
- The Hazm Movement, created by a merger of old FSA-linked groups in January 2014; and
- Several southern FSA factions linked to an international supply network run out of Jordan, including the Yarmouk Brigade.

Local Islamist and pseudo-FSA alliances: There are many factions that seem to be generally aligned with the FSA and often depend at least in part on its supply networks, but also espouse a more independent and ideological identity—typically Islamist of some kind—and may have alternative sources of support. Prominent examples include:

- The Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union, an alliance created in November 2013 by groups in the Damascus countryside, rooted in local Islamist traditions;
- The Mujahedin Army, created by Aleppine rebels in January 2014 to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). A large faction called the Noureddin Zengi Battalions (see below) left the Mujahedin Army in May 2014. At least some of the remaining groups are linked to the Muslim Brotherhood;
- The Asalawa-Tanmiya Front, created in late 2012 and financed by quietist, pro-Saudi Salafist groups in the Gulf. It includes some reasonably important factions, like the Noureddin Zengi Battalions and the Ahl al-Athar Brigades, but seems ineffectual as a political force; and

- Muslim Brotherhood-sponsored alliances, including the Shields of the Revolution and *Faylaq al-Sham, the latter being a* reorganisation of the so-called Commission for the Protection of Civilians.

The Islamic Front: A powerful Salafist-led alliance formed in November 2013 by some of Syria's largest Islamist militias. So far, the Front has not been able to realise its full aspirations—to merge all member factions under a single leadership and turn itself into the undisputed centrepiece of the rebellion—largely because of a damaging conflict with ISIL and the rise of rival factions like the Syria Revolutionaries' Front. Its most important member groups are:

- The Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement: An Islamist umbrella movement under Salafist leadership, strongest in Idleb and Hama but with affiliates all across the country. Ideologically dominant within the Front;
- The Tawhid Brigade: A big group from the Aleppo hinterland which was formerly aligned with the FSA and appeared to be supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, but now seems to have opted for the Salafist camp; and
- The Army of Islam: The largest group in the Damascus region, based in Douma, led by Mohammed Zahran Alloush.

Independent Salafist groups: There are a number of independent Salafist factions, often small and with a high percentage of foreign fighters, particularly in northern Syria. While formally non-aligned, they often lean towards either Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIL. Such factions include the Jaish al-Sham (Idleb; Syrians), the Sham al-Islam Movement (Latakia; Moroccans), the Junoud al-Sham (Latakia; Chechens), the Muhajerinwa-Ansar Alliance (Idleb-Hama; mixed Gulf nationals, Libyans and Syrians), and Jund al-Sham (Homs; Lebanese, Palestinians).

Jabhat al-Nusra: The Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate is a powerful group that recently also activated a small Lebanese wing. Composed of a mix of Syrians and foreign fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra seeks to embed itself in the wider Islamist insurgency, working closely with Islamic Front groups and other religious factions, and generally avoiding unnecessary provocations against other rebels.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): An Iraqi-Syrian Al-Qaeda splinter active in both countries and incipiently present in Lebanon as well, which is highly reliant on foreign fighters. Unlike Jabhat al-Nusra, ISIL has aggressively pursued its interests and sought to control territory.

Ties with other rebel groups deteriorated in the latter half of 2013, and in January 2014 every major rebel group in northern Syria turned on ISIL. It has now been driven out of the northwest Syria, but remains well implanted along the Euphrates and among the insurgents in Iraq, where it now controls large parts of the territory.

The Kurds: Syria's Kurdish politics are complex and mostly disconnected from trends within the Arab uprising. On the ground, one movement is dominant: the Turkey-born, Iraq-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) which has set up several Syrian front organisations, including two armed ones: the Popular Protection Units (YPG) and a civilian police force called Asayish. Ideologically, they follow the PKK's secular-leftist ideology and employ many female fighters. The PKK's Syrian network also includes a small Syriac-Christian component.

Regional implications

Regionally, the Al-Qaeda split may be a driver for expansion, by forcing the two factions to compete for influence among potential allies around Syria.

By May 2014, only two armed groups in Syria have officially claimed attacks outside Syrian territory, namely in Lebanon: Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL. The effects of the jihadist split are difficult to foresee; operations further afield may be attractive as propaganda of the deed, but on the other hand striking abroad would surely increase international pressure on the new jihadist haven in northern Syria. Regionally, the Al-Qaeda split may be a driver for expansion, by forcing the two factions to compete for influence among potential allies around Syria. In this context it is worth noting that both Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL began to claim attacks in Lebanon at roughly the same time. It is also likely that Al-Qaeda will attempt to reorganise itself in Iraq, presumably relying on support from Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

Several other rebel groups are directly affiliated with foreign political groups, most obviously those backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the PKK. The Syrian rebels' dependence on external financing makes the conflict ripe for international exploitation and proxy conflict. The blurring of Syria's borders with Iraq and Lebanon and the pro-rebel Islamist mobilisation in the Gulf may further internationalise the conflict anyway.

Bashar al-Assad's Political and Security Calculations

Although conventional wisdom has it that the regime is winning, making its strategy an object of interest and deliberation, the fact is that it is not winning, has no strategy, and is not even a regime in any traditional definition. What we call the regime, today, is a power structure broadly distinct from state institutions; the latter remain both resilient in their outside appearances and thoroughly dysfunctional and disempowered. The regime structure is not hierarchical and vertical but rather horizontal and fluid. It amounts to a constellation of individuals whose position within the system depends on their ability to muster manpower (through institutional means or otherwise) to control portions of territory and to access resources (mostly using predatory tactics). These individuals coordinate and compete within a system where power and legitimacy are now primarily vested at a grassroots level. Frequent and direct access to al-Assad, once a key enabler and yardstick of influence within the regime, has become a secondary consideration. For instance, prominent *shabbiha* and other warlord figures may have little connection to him while carving out fiefdoms for themselves.

What we call the regime, today, is a power structure broadly distinct from state institutions; the latter remain both resilient in their outside appearances and thoroughly dysfunctional and disempowered.

Al-Assad retains a central position within this constellation for different reasons. First, his presence is indispensable to preserve the fiction of the state, and thus the regime's overall cohesiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of its sympathisers. Without him, the regime would resemble the opposition—a loose collection of militias fighting not just for survival but over the spoils of war. Generally speaking, the ruling family's strength is to be found in the weakness of the regime's institutions, which could easily fray from the top-down. Second, al-Assad holds all the cards concerning the regime's foreign policy; he is perceived at home as a smart player in this field, and is seen by his allies as a necessary evil and a "useful idiot". Third, and consequently, al-Assad is the only figure within the regime to have a relatively comprehensive view of the various components of the regime's disjointed body; although its different organs misinform him to a degree, they

remain pigeon-holed and therefore at a relative disadvantage themselves.

That being said, al-Assad commands little respect among his troops and enjoys little control over them. What authority he has he fails to exert: at present his leadership consists, for the most part, in accommodating and covering for the trends set by the behaviour of those fighting on his side. The regime's course of action reflects, to a large extent, such bottom-up trends that are what constitutes the regime's policy-making (there is no strategic vision or consultation process). There is no need to order security services to snipe at funerals, *shabbiha* to commit massacres, armed forces to use barrel bombs, or supporters to sport Shia-inspired paraphernalia. Nowadays, such ideas surface from the ground and spread within a unifying culture and worldview, a broadly shared ethos. Al-Assad simply has nothing to gain from going against the grain. (His allies, conversely, similarly refrain from using their leverage to rein in the most damaging tactics of his regime, and provide no incentive for him to do so.)

Al-Assad remains an enigma, and the conventional wisdom with which he is typically associated does help understand the man's designs. He is not delusional or naïve, but rather, cynical and self-satisfied. He is neither stupid nor smart; although he believes he has a towering intellect. He is both fully aware of the very nature of the regime he leads and convinced by the sophisticated narrative he has developed to justify every one of its shortcomings, failures and crimes. He may be subject to manipulation within the power structure, but he himself is a master-manipulator, and proves ruthless when it comes to securing his own position. He is not an outsider, but a product of the regime's fierce inner core; he nonetheless has several layers of varnish that often impress his Western interlocutors in private meetings. Al-Assad is not obsessed with appropriating his father's legacy; he loathes the comparison and strives to distinguish himself from him. He is indeed fundamentally different in many ways: he misunderstands and looks down on his own society; he brings a spoiled-child, nouveau-riche mentality to the practice of power; he fears strong figures in his entourage and empowers weak characters; he micromanages rather than delegates; and he never seeks compromise, whether he is in a position of strength or weakness.

His style of leadership during the uprising can perhaps best be understood by looking at what he has chosen to focus on. In this respect, bridging the fault lines within Syrian society and addressing the original causes of the crisis (in its domestic dimensions) have been the least of his priorities. The regime's instinct on this level was to vigorously repress the

more peaceful forms a dissent, invest in disfiguring and radicalising the opposition, then pinning all blame on the other camp and using the ensuing conflict to rally support both at home and abroad. Although there is no indication he took the lead in designing and implementing such a strategy, al-Assad endorsed it.

His first concern, as suggested above, has been the regime's internal cohesiveness, which called for making the conflict an existential one from an Alawite perspective. His second priority has been to maintain his external alliances, which he does with a mixture of blackmail (brandishing the potential of full collapse) and subservience (to the point of abdicating any notion of sovereignty). Finally, his eye has always been on the dynamics within the international community, which he views as a decisive criterion for survival.

His perceptions of geopolitics and the international community rest on past experiences. He has learnt that a winning strategy can simply consist in weathering criticism, pressures and actual threats until the mood has changed in the regime's favour. This is how he dealt with the condemnations aired internationally as he repressed the Damascus Spring in the early 2000s, the dangers posed by a US neo-conservative agenda in Iraq around 2003, and the crisis in Lebanon as of 2005. Ultimately, he assumes, "the world will come back to him"; it is just a matter of hanging on long enough.

He also is confident that a combination of Western ambivalence, the determination of his allies, and international polarisation and gridlock offer the space he needs to pursue his course of action. A keen observer of foreign affairs, he feels that the US has entered a new era of isolationism, and that the international system of governance largely dominated by Washington is coming undone. To encourage Western hesitancy, he sought to escalate regime violence gradually—crossing every possible threshold but over a relatively long period of time. Simultaneously, he raised the costs of continued conflict—through the sheer levels of humanitarian suffering and the radicalisation of society—while systematically denying his opponents the easy exit they seemed to hope for desperately, such as his stepping down or seeking a political solution. Arguably, these inflections are the clearest hallmark of al-Assad's personal style in the regime's overall handling of the crisis.

To conclude, a discussion of al-Assad's political and security calculations also raises the question of the political and security calculations of his adversaries. The regime is engaged in an existential struggle. It has closed ranks and enjoys unfailing and virtually unlimited support from its allies,

as it settles into a long game. It is also betting on increasing radicalisation to force its detractors to accept the current order. Much of this reality has been met with little else than wishful thinking: that al-Assad would reveal himself a selfless leader; that the regime would crumble; that a makeshift opposition would build an alternative from the bottom up; that the Russians or Iranians would blink; that Obama would budge; or that the regime somehow would offer a solution. Three years on, it is time to look this regime in the eye and start planning on how to deal with it as it truly is, and on the basis of its promise of several more years of misery.

Way Ahead: What Are the Prospects for a Settlement in Syria?

Since 15 March 2011, the revolution in Syria has been struggling to achieve its goals. The country-wide protests have escalated into an all-out war. The death toll is estimated at over 160,000, including children and women; over 680,000 are injured, and more than half of the country's 23 million people have been displaced. About 250,000 people are believed to be in besieged communities, according to Valerie Amos, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. The toll has considerably increased in the last year, as a cycle of bloodshed continues to tear the country and its population apart. The country appears to be heading towards an intractable and protracted conflict.

Sectarianism as an instrument of realpolitik: local and external actors

Sectarian strife in Syria is a result rather than a cause of war. Started as peaceful and inclusive popular movements striving for social and economic justice, the early uprisings posed a serious threat to the regime: they carried legitimacy and a powerful narrative. The regime's early strategy was to shape the conflict into a military and sectarian one. Resistance to the regime has moved in the last three years from non-violent revolt to armed insurgency. Many within the armed resistance have also turned to religion to draw strength and mobilisation; but the role of external funders has been crucial in favouring the trend from secularism to extremism.

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Syria's secular revolution was tragically transformed into the century's new holy war or jihad—although foreign jihadists still constitute a small percentage of the armed opposition. The UN estimates the number of foreign fighters in Syria at around 7,000. Overall, a hundred rebel groups are believed to operate against regime forces throughout the country. The two main jihadist groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra fi Bilad as-Sham, are increasingly fighting each other for leadership in the eastern province of Aleppo, the Hassaka, Raqqa and Deir Ezzor provinces. They also

sometimes collaborate with Salafist groups (like Ahrar al-Sham) or non-jihadist groups within the Aleppo Military Council.

The regime is still in control of the army and the security forces, despite increased defections to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which are estimated at about 10,000 to 20,000 out of an army of 200,000. Splits in the army—that are frequent in times of revolution—have not yet materialised. A Supreme Military Council (SMC) headed by General Salim Idriss was nevertheless created in November 2012, and areas close to the Turkish border around Idlib and Raqqa, as well as in the provinces of Damascus and Aleppo, continue to escape government control.

The real divide is not religious or sectarian but geopolitical. The great game being played in Syria is between a broad coalition of US-Israeli-Saudi-Qatari-Turkish interests on the one hand and the al-Assad regime, Russia, Iran and Hizballah on the other. The Iranian government perceives the preservation of the al-Assad regime in Damascus as part of its own survival rather than an opportunity to export its Shia-inspired agenda. Backed by the US, Israel is intent on breaking this 'axis-of-resistance' and exploit the Syrian crisis to isolate and weaken Iran. Russia wants to prevent further regime change after the Libya intervention. Turkey's AKP government is eager to boost its religious and political leadership in the region. By funding radical Sunni groups within Syria, the Gulf states have found a golden opportunity to weaken Tehran in the Gulf at lesser costs through the Syrian quagmire.

The Geneva Peace Talks: what went wrong

After months of deliberations, the Geneva II negotiations forced both sides (the regime and opposition groups) to the negotiation table; they failed however to bring a peaceful resolution to the tragic conflict in Syria. The roots of failure can be traced to the nature and scope of mediation, the negotiation framework, the strategies deployed before, during and after negotiations, and the role of third-parties.

1. Ambiguous language

Held in February 2014, the Geneva II talks followed on the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 agreed by the US and Russia. The plan called for a transitional governing body with full executive power to be formed by mutual consent that could include members of the current government and the opposition and other groups. The objective was to oversee elections and provide for a peaceful transition. In order to pave the way for Russian endorsement, the plan failed to address the end to

al-Assad's rule or the identity of opposition groups. This ambiguity allowed Russia to exercise a veto power, and the regime to continue its war of attrition.

2. No agreed negotiation formula: rhetoric and positions

The goal of Geneva II was to broker an agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition for a full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué. The parties were brought to the table with no pre-negotiation agreement on the framework and formula for discussions. The Syrian government representatives upheld the same position throughout the conference by repeating the need to fight terrorism and refusing to engage with opposition members. In the process, their interlocutors at the table were placed on the list of terrorists and accused of not pursuing a national agenda. Although initially reluctant to enter into talks with regime officials, and being discredited by some of the fighters on the ground for doing so, the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces presented a 22-point document on the settlement of the conflict which included provisions on ceasefire, the exchange of prisoners and the establishment of a transitional governing body in parallel to fighting terrorism. It was also joined at the table by representatives of some of the armed rebel groups. The Coalition gave up its pre-condition relating to the ouster of the Syrian president. In doing so, opposition groups appeared to be more conciliatory, a strategy that bolstered their credibility within the international community, at the cost of domestic support with no gain at the table.

3. Weak mediation (or the mediator's inability to change the game)

There is no "best way" to approach a dispute but the mediator is required to avoid conflict spirals. In negotiation theory, negotiations are considered to be ripe when there is a mutually hurting stalemate. Processes are ideally managed by cycling through the parties' interests and rights, and managing the power distribution. Mediation can adopt different styles: facilitation, formulation or manipulation. First, by adopting a facilitating strategy, a mediator ensures that the actors have access to all necessary information to estimate the best possible range of mutually preferable outcomes. Second, by adopting a formulative strategy, the moderator may overcome stalemated negotiations by causing parties to consider, and perhaps even accept, new possible resolutions. Third, manipulative mediation involves attempting to shift the limits of each actor, thereby increasing the probability that the actors are able to identify alternatives within an expanding zone of agreement. Formulative and manipulative forms are strongly associated with the

achievement of formal agreements. Manipulative mediation is more effective for crisis abatement and for securing an agreement. If they have enough power, manipulative mediators can increase both the immediate costs of continuing conflict and the future costs of reneging on an agreement using "stick-and-carrot" approaches. In this case, Lakhdar Brahimi was given a mandate by the United Nations to act as facilitator when the conflict instead required formulation and manipulation. The mediator also failed to impact on the post-negotiation phase.

The way forward: strong mediation, de-sectarianisation and dual military and diplomatic strategy

A long-term and responsible vision would prepare for political transition in the hope of restoring peace and stabilising and reuniting the country. A combination of backward- and forward-looking approaches could help in establishing a viable future for Syria by addressing responsibilities on all sides while allowing for national reconciliation. The way forward lies in an effective dual diplomatic and military strategy, and the 'de-sectarianisation' of both narratives and practises.

1. Impacting on the parties' Best Alternative to No Agreement (BATNA): perceptions and interests of direct and indirect actors

In order to enhance the effectiveness of third-party intervention, the cost of reaching no agreement or maintaining the status quo (the parties' BATNA) should be made higher than the resolution of the current conflict. An effective strategy would be for external actors to influence alternatives and perceptions by forcefully implementing strategies at both the diplomatic and military levels. Time being a source of power, external parties should make all parties impatient to reach a mutual agreement.

The al-Assad regime: regime cohesion and impact of revolt

Experts generally agree that the army and security forces have remained loyal. The regime does not appear on the verge of collapsing soon, especially after having recently regained control of the city of Homs at the heart of the armed insurgency. As long as the al-Assad regime is confident in a favourable military outcome benefiting from military and logistical support from Iran, Russia and Hizballah, it will stall on diplomatic solutions. The regime has also successfully managed to instil fear of religious extremism in the international community; much of the media and policy attention is now focused on the Muslim Brothers,

Salafist and jihadists inside Syria. The conflict has also been successfully framed as an existential struggle for the Alawite community. It appears however that discontent within the community is increasingly been voiced with regards to the management of the conflict by the al-Assad family, and increased claims made for power-sharing. External actors have an opportunity to use carrots and sticks by reaching out to those members of the community while threatening key military decision-makers and the ruling family with indictments for war crimes.

The US government

Reluctant to engage actively in the crisis, the US government has adopted a very cautious diplomacy. Rather than being an effective tool to contain terrorism, Syria's transformation into a new platform for international jihad represents a source of regional and international insecurity. The deteriorating relations with Russia over Crimea and Ukraine do not augur well for a deal over Syria. But progress over nuclear talks with the Iranian government could provide momentum for possible linkages on the resolution of the Syrian crisis.

The Gulf States

Western countries have also largely relied on their regional allies, such as the Gulf states, to provide financial and military support to the armed resistance inside Syria. Although the Islamic Front militias (backed by the Saudis and Qataris) have taken over areas in the north and northeastern parts of the country where they impose a practise of religion which is foreign to the country's tradition of moderate and tolerant Islam, popular uprisings in Syria were not inspired by an Islamist agenda. They received funding, however, primarily from sources originating from the Gulf countries with an Islamist agenda. Support by the Gulf is favouring extremist groups at the expense of the existing democratic and secular forces on the ground.

2. Diplomatic and military support of secular groups inside and outside Syria

Civil society is still actively engaged in non-armed resistance through the Local Coordination Committees, and groups anchored in political traditions inspired by socialist, communist, nationalist or liberal traditions, as well as new organisations such as Muwatana, Nabd, Maan, the Democratic Pole and Kuluna Sooriyoon. Syria's political transition will also be strongly influenced by the military configuration in the battlefield. In the short term, the international community should urgently seek a

ceasefire and demand humanitarian access to the populations inside the country. Support to secular groups provided by a coalition beyond the USA and the Gulf states would increase the legitimacy of external support.

The Free Syrian Army's counter-insurgency is increasingly relying on guerrilla tactics, backed by weapons smuggled by army defectors. Several battalions and brigades have united against extremists around a clearly defined secular agenda, like the Kataeb al-Wehda al-Wataniya (KWW) or the Jabhat Ahrar Sooriya (JAS) in western Idlib, or a mixed platform of seculars and moderate Islamists like Liwa' Shuhada' Dooma and Liwa' Usood al-Ghoota who currently challenge the Salafist group Liwa' al-Islam, led by Zahran Alloush in Douma; or Liwa' Thuwwar al-Raqqa in Raqqa. With effective backing, these groups could regain the ground controlled by jihadists and stop the extremists from winning and delegitimising the internal resistance. Military support to the FSA could be enhanced and made effective by delivering anti-aircraft weapons; and credible threats voiced and upheld beyond the immediate concern for the dismantlement of chemical weapons. Since January 2014, the widespread fighting between ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra might offer a good opportunity to expel the two groups from the country. In early May 2014, Zawahiri called for the jihadists to return to Iraq.

Conclusion

Regrettably, a peaceful transition through a viable and lasting settlement appears to be increasingly unlikely between regime forces, the armed resistance and foreign extremists. In parallel to uniting in their fight against the regime and jihadists, the Syrian opposition needs to plan for transition to a post-Assad Syria. Future peace settlements in Syria will need to strike a balance between maintaining a cohesive political and territorial entity and accounting for the rights of religious and ethnic minorities. All components of the population, including the Alawite community, should be included in the process. If given guarantees for the post-revolution phase, the Alawites would be drawn into the transitional phase leading to political pluralism; otherwise, they might resist to the bitter end. Prosecution should be sought against the ones who have perpetrated crimes, but the bulk of the army (with over 200,000 soldiers and officers, with an additional 300,000 in reserve) will need somehow to be integrated. All this presumes that control of military and security affairs is effectively handed over to civilian rule in the transition period.

The new institutions will face daunting issues: the challenge of dismantling the extensive security and intelligence apparatus while

maintaining public security; adopting a new constitution representative of all components of Syrian society; reforming the political and legal systems, and establishing the rule of law; and last but not least, preventing retribution from happening by allowing for an effective process of reconciliation. Core debates on the relationship between religion, state and society, the role of women in society and the protection of the Alawite, Christian, Druze and Kurdish minorities have already been initiated among different opposition groups. At stake lies the future of Syria, the Syrians and possibly the whole region.

Politics of Power Centres in Egypt

The dominant view that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has the ability to control all decisions in the state has often led to analytical shortcomings. Since Mubarak's fall, a paradigm shift has taken place inside Egypt's complex power structure, with many key players now influencing each other. Many did not foresee the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood regime due to the misreading of the power dynamics in the country. A complete and full grasp of Egypt's political trajectory necessitates the comprehension of the labyrinthine structure of power centres.

There are three categories of power centres: state institutions, the executive branch and non-state societal actors. The main players among state institutions are ones that deal with security, economics, the rule of law and foreign affairs. Within the non-state category are the NGOs, media, the business community, various political parties and religious institutions. Some power centres are more important than others, but together they all influence today's decision-making process in Cairo and shape events on the ground. As a result of these internally divided power centres, neither the military nor any other single institution is solely in charge.

Over the past three years, the structure of Egypt's various power centres has continuously shifted and remains fluid today. The military continues to be the main pillar of the state, but since Morsi's ouster some major decisions were also taken through non-military bodies and mechanisms. These include cabinet appointments, the formation of the fifty-member constitutional committee, the drafting of the constitution itself, the issuance of various laws and judicial decisions.

In the summer of 2013, Egypt's power centres were clearly aligned against the Muslim Brotherhood government as Morsi lost complete control of the country; all state institutions and most non-state actors had turned against him. However, few observers foresaw the actual ouster of the Brotherhood from power. The removal of Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi together with many other senior military officers by Morsi had led some to conclude prematurely that the Brotherhood had full control over the military. There was also a lack of recognition that the actual removal of the senior military leadership could not have occurred without relying on the military itself. They overlooked the close relationship between a rising generation of younger officers with their

elders, especially the father-son-like relationship between Tantawi and al-Sisi.

The police, the intelligence establishment and the military were frustrated with what they regarded as an incompetent Brotherhood regime putting organisational goals and priorities above Egyptian state interest; in their view, Morsi was jeopardising national security by ignoring serious domestic grievances, allowing jihadists to establish a stronghold in the Sinai, and pursuing a foreign policy that alienated Gulf governments. Although, the military leadership initially appeared to show no interest in becoming politically involved, a severe deterioration in the political situation and the likely prospects of a full-scale civil war led the military to put forward the 3 July road map for transition. There are four noteworthy events that convinced several power centres that the Brotherhood government should not be allowed to complete its full four-year term, and therefore produced the coup.

First, the November 2012 constitutional crisis put Morsi above the law and alienated most of the power centres. The appointment of a prosecutor-general, whom many viewed as illegitimate, further sidelined the judiciary and intensified the backlash. More problematic was how Morsi handled the aftermath of the crisis when a Brotherhood militia attacked peaceful protestors outside the presidential palace on 5 December 2012. Morsi then asked al-Sisi to host an emergency national dialogue lunch with major political figures. However, two hours before the actual meeting, Morsi cancelled it; al-Sisi complied with Morsi's wishes, but realised the elected president was taking direct orders from the unelected guidance bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Second, the Brotherhood's rapprochement with Iran did harm to Egypt's strategically important relations with other Gulf countries. Publicly, it began in August 2012 with Morsi's visit to Tehran followed by then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's three-day visit to Egypt. Also contentious were the resumption of commercial flights between Cairo and Tehran for the first time in three decades and the signature of a bilateral tourist agreement.

Third, the continued deterioration of the security situation in the Sinai Peninsula posed a threat for Egyptian national security and regional stability. In February 2013, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces met with Morsi, and a detailed assessment of the internal and external security situation was presented with a focus on the challenges in the Sinai. The presentation accompanied concrete recommendations on how to proceed on several issues, especially how to deal with Sinai. Yet, Morsi

is said to have ignored all suggestions and did not address any of the threats.

Last, Morsi's hostility towards two countries in June 2013, his final month in power, served as a last straw. The Brotherhood is said to have aired a live emergency national security meeting to discuss the issue of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam without the knowledge of the participants. The mention of sensitive information, such as military strike and intelligence sabotage of the dam, created international uproar. Morsi's infamous Syria speech in Cairo stadium, in which he severed diplomatic ties with Syria and called for a jihad, was regarded as dangerous by many in Egypt.

The regime did not respond to a series of warnings in the months leading up to its removal from power. In late January 2013, when the political deadlock continued to intensify, Morsi declared a state of emergency in Port Said, Ismalia and Suez, and the military was deployed to restore order. At the time, Field Marshall al-Sisi warned the Muslim Brotherhood that "their disagreement on running the affairs of the country may lead to the collapse of the state and threatens the future of the coming generations". Even during US State Secretary John Kerry's visit to Cairo in early March of 2013, al-Sisi privately would have said that the Brotherhood would not last in power unless they altered their political course.

The power configuration in Egypt has shifted dramatically since the July 2013 ouster. The key power centres remain anti-Brotherhood, but two ideological camps have been battling each other: a nationalist camp and a more liberal one. The former prefers a strong state represented by a strong security establishment and military, while the latter opposes the idea of an assertive security and military establishment playing a major role in governance. Strong tensions and frustrations have been building up between these two camps in all of Egypt's power centres, as reflected in the decision-making process. For example, during a November 2013 cabinet meeting, an intense rift erupted between then-Deputy Prime Minister Bahaa Eldin and Interior Minister Ibrahim over the proposed protest law, which led to it being delayed.

Many of Egypt's political power centres appear to support al-Sisi, but still many observers wonder about the trajectory of the country under him now that he has become President. There is no definite answer, but al-Sisi's professional career has helped him gain the support of some institutions, such as the military, the intelligence community and the police. Al-Sisi's efforts as defence minister to improve the relationship

with the Ministry of the Interior will also help; it is worth remembering that the police was an institution used by Mubarak to counterbalance the military establishment.

Additionally, al-Sisi enjoys the support of many in the media, business community, religious institutions, and several of the key political parties. This kind of power centre alignment behind the head of state was not in place during Mubarak's last days and definitely not during Tantawi's or Morsi's terms in power. It is important to remember that these power centres are fluid and dynamic and could quickly realign. Yet, the current configuration will likely help al-Sisi govern; but his ultimate success will depend on his ability to meet the expectations of a population where 70% are less than 30 years of age.

Assessing the Impact of the Repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt currently faces the worst period of repression in its more than 80-year old history. In past decades, the group flourished working underground and survived periods of mass arrests and clamp-downs. But this dynamic was governed by certain rules of engagement that managed this uneasy relationship with the authorities. The state did not seek to behead the organisation or spill its blood and, in return, the group did not turn to violence or push for open rebellion. The July 2013 coup and subsequent bloody events changed these tacit rules and the Brotherhood is currently in a state of flux. As the Egyptian state seeks to unravel what is Egypt's oldest and biggest Islamist organisation, it opens the way for Islamist actors inside and outside the organisation to justify violent insurgency. The Brotherhood currently lacks a strategic vision or effective control over many of its cadres and this further exacerbates the likelihood of Islamists adopting violence. Understanding how the Brotherhood got to this point and the ongoing dynamics may help answer questions about the group's future.

State repression following the July 2013 coup has triggered a leadership crisis within the organisation. The Muslim Brotherhood had until then drawn its strength from being a closely knit and rigidly hierarchical organisation that valued unwavering obedience. However, this trait, more reminiscent of fascist parties in the early 20th century, became a liability as the group was forced to adapt to repression after nearly three years of operating openly. Nearly a week before the coup, the Brotherhood and its Salafist allies set up camp in the eastern Cairo suburb of Nasr City at Rabaa Square. With the incarceration of Morsi and other key figures, the square became a hub of operations for the remaining leadership. The most senior among these leaders had cut their teeth during the Mubarak years and become accustomed to the old ways of dealing with the state. With the lessons learned from the January 2011 revolution, they believed that a large sit-in protest would be sufficient to pressure the military to reverse the coup. In such an environment, the chain of command was further exposed to actors outside the organisation who made fateful decisions for the group. The setting of the sit-in allowed for the most charismatic and vociferous to dictate a course of action. Most of these actors were in fact Salafist sheikhs from the Islamic Group and the central Egypt and Mahala regions, like the Asala Party and other so-called Salafist televangelists like Safwat Hegazi. They had become closer to the Brotherhood during Morsi's tenure as more

established Islamists, like the Salafist Call and its Nour Party, drifted away. Individuals like Safwat Hegazi, who hold no official leadership position inside the Brotherhood, resorted to tactics on the ground that led to confrontations with the Egyptian army on multiple occasions and produced dozens of casualties.

In addition, as leading Brotherhood figures either went into hiding or were arrested, the second tier of leadership was not prepared to manage effectively the affairs of the organisation. They had to compete with energised and younger members from inside the movement who were joined by former members who had split following the January 2011 revolution due to disagreements with leadership. The latter became increasingly engaged in designing the response to the coup. Decision-making inside the group became decentralised and it became clear that it no longer simply acted for the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation but rather for a wider segment of Egyptians influenced by Islamists. The majority of those present at Rabaa square were not official members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The process of decentralising decision-making within the movement was exacerbated with the bloody clearing of Rabaa Square on 14 August 2013. The indiscriminate killing of more than 600 protesters emboldened actors who advocated for a violent response against the Egyptian state. The voices of Brotherhood leaders still at large who understood the dangers of such a track were drowned out and most of the moderates fled to Turkey, Qatar and the United Kingdom. In the following months, university campuses across Egypt became incubators for violence on the part of Islamist youth. Al-Azhar University in Cairo became a particularly hot spot. In attempting to cope with the rapidly changing situation on the ground, other Islamists doubled down on their efforts to organise what came to be known as the Coalition for the Defense of Legitimacy, which largely advocated non-violence. Soon there was a clear divide between tactical street action and the political leadership.

Violence by anti-coup Islamists began in late 2013 and early 2014, as new groups appeared. The Molotov Movement, Set Fire and Execution Movement sprang up advocating a form of violent Islamo-anarchism against the state in retribution for those killed. The lack of outright sponsorship by Muslim Brotherhood leaders of such actions drove many on the street to mistrust the political leadership. Some strategists for the Muslim Brotherhood currently are not part of the proper chain of command and coordinate with exiled members in Turkey, Qatar and the United Kingdom. Some radical actors outside Egypt use the internet and television channels like the Turkey-based Rabaa and Ahrar 25, as well as

the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera to advocate for a "hot revolution" and the need to abandon non-violence. They are mostly Salafists who use religion to justify violence in retribution for state repression.

Some revolutionary ideas are also challenging traditional Muslim Brotherhood dogma. Some youth say they are fighting to deconstruct the Egyptian state, which they see as inherently secular, controlled by the West and incompatible with an Islamist Egypt. This discourse often takes an apocalyptic tone. They believe the battle they face with the current Egyptian state is not only proof of the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood and its current leadership to implement the Islamist Project but that the nation state is itself an inherent enemy. Concepts used by Al-Qaeda ideologues who urge them to understand that "borders are dust" and that the West intellectually colonises the Muslim world are discussed abundantly.

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The Muslim Brotherhood leadership has not been able to deliver an effective response to this creeping acceptance of violence or provide a strategic alternative. Recently, the Brotherhood's secretary-general, based in Qatar, released a statement condemning violence and rejecting factions who resort to extremist tactics. He cited Mubarak and a former Minister of the Interior saying that the Brotherhood is not a violent organisation. However, the reaction from many of the active youth was that of feeling betrayed. Some of them believe that the leadership, which had become acquainted in dealing with the old regime, lacks the necessary qualities to revolutionise the movement's message or truly confront the state. Recent research shows that this feeling of contempt is growing and new revolutionary and violent ideas are actively discussed in Islamist circles.

These dynamics have created a complicated and toxic landscape that will further prevent true political progress in Egypt, let alone a viable future for the Muslim Brotherhood. The state justifies its repression of the movement by pointing to terrorist activity and increasingly violent behaviour by factions over which the Brotherhood has no control. At the same time Brotherhood leadership has failed to deliver a viable or practical path towards a political settlement, comfortable with a zero-sum game and blaming the authorities for the turn to violence by some Islamist youth. As the violence intensifies,

Brotherhood leaders will further lose any control they have over the Islamist street. Any return to politics by a segment of the Brotherhood will be rejected by those now creating facts on the ground, and those members who may move closer towards political settlement will become targets themselves.

The Muslim Brotherhood may survive but the nature of the current dynamics governing this period of repression will have an unprecedented impact on the organisation. Today, more blood is being spilled, there are shrinking havens in neighbouring countries and MB leaders have little control over mobilised cadres. Most importantly, after governing for one year, it has expanded its base of followers and sympathisers, and some stakeholders do not share the Brotherhood's pragmatism of past decades. The group will further fragment. Continued state repression is unlikely to result in the political surrender the state seeks but only weakens the ability of the movement to manage less pragmatic elements. Indeed, any political settlement reached in the current environment will not yield political stability. Only a de-escalation of violence might allow room for any remaining pragmatic elements to consolidate their grip on the group and work to channel opposition demands into the political arena. In the long run the group will likely abandon its rigid hierarchical structure and insistence on blind obedience as the group struggles to adapt its message to the new context and a generation of cadres inspired by revolution.

The Enduring Sinai Crisis

A history of grievances

The rapid deterioration of the security conditions in the Sinai Peninsula has alarmed both local and international observers. It has highlighted an enduring crisis that the region has faced since the complete withdrawal of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in 1982. The discriminatory, institutionalised policies targeting the peninsula's indigenous population, its overall underdevelopment, and the uneven development of the north and south of the region have fostered an environment in which grievances against the central authorities in Cairo and the people of the Nile valley is widely felt. The negative stereotyping of the peninsula's inhabitants as "terrorists", "traitors", or "smugglers" added to these grievances. More serious were the waves of brutal crackdowns in the 2000s that were not limited to suspected terrorists, but extended to collective punishments of clans, tribes, villages and towns.

These conditions have provided a hospitable environment for various armed groups as well as ideologies that legitimate various forms of political and social violence, including terrorism. Additionally, the logistical necessities of armed activism, from light weapons to the know-how required to build and utilise explosive devices, is available in the peninsula due to various local factors and regional dynamics. In that context, groups such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem, ABM) were founded and have risen to the national scene especially after the 8 July 2013 Presidential Guard and 14 August 2013 Raba'a al-'Adawaiyya massacres, in which more than 974 anti-coup protestors were killed by a joint-operation of the army's special forces and paratroopers units and the police's central security forces units.

Sinai's Islamist map

There is a wide diversity of armed actors[1] in the peninsula, ranging from human traffickers and drug dealers to armed Islamist groups. Within Islamism, two large and diverse categories exist. The first category is composed of non-violent groups, some of which participated in the democratic transitional process of 2011-2013. This category includes groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and their Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), as well as the Salafist Call (al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya) and their Nour Party. It also includes former jihadists (who still uphold an anti-democratic stance but abandoned political violence), such as some of the leaders and members of Ahl al-Sunnawa al-Jama'a society (People of the

Sunnah and the Group, ASJ) and non-violent Takfirists (excommunicators), who exist in small remote communities in Rafah and its environs.

Violent Islamist actors, who targeted Israel, the Egyptian police and military, and others at different phases in the past, include Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, Majlis Shura al-Mujahidinfi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis (Consultative Council of Holy Strivers Near Jerusalem, MSM) and the smaller Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam). A loose network that usually issues communiqués in support of ABM and MSM operations calls itself al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyyain Sinai (SJS).

The influence of non-violent Islamists is stronger (and much more visible) in northwestern Sinai—mainly from B'ir al-'Abd to El-Arish. East of el-Arish, the influence and the activities of Salafist- and takfirist-leaning jihadists are more visible for various reasons. Also, Gaza-based armed Islamist organisations have some influence, members, and resources in the northeast, especially Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) and Hamas in Egyptian Rafah.

The evolution of violent Islamism in Sinai

During the 2000s, the Mubarak regime initiated a security sweep that started during the Palestinian second Intifada (uprising) and gradually escalated after the simultaneous bombings in October 2004 in Taba and Nuweiba. After these terrorist attacks, the State Security Investigations (SSI) and General Intelligence Services (GIS) had limited information about the perpetrators and therefore cast a wide net in northeast Sinai. The SSI arrested around three thousand people, and detained the women and children of some of the suspects until they surrendered.[2]

A second wave of bombings hit Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005. This time, an organisation declared responsibility for the attacks. Al-Tawhidwa al-Jihad (Monotheism and Holy Struggle, TJ) in Sinai was inspired by Abu Musab al-Zaraqawi's Al-Qaeda organisation in Iraq, but most of its leaders and members were locals. The founder, Khaled Musa'id, was a dentist from el-Arish City and a member of the al-Swaraka tribe, one of the largest and most influential in northern Sinai. Musa'id was killed in a fire-fight with Central Security Forces on 28 September 2005. Despite his death, his main contribution was transforming an ideological narrative in books and speeches into a real organisational structure, with a hierarchy and multiple cells in at least five cities/towns (el-Arish, Egyptian Rafah, Sheikh Zuwaid, El-Ismailia and Nakhl/Halal Mountain).

The offshoots of TJ went in different directions, including suspected members and commanders of ABM and Jund al-Islam. But other former members became content with preaching Salafism and locally engaging in Salafist social work, after the processes of transformations that several jihadist organisations underwent in the 2000s. These activities included arbitrating tribal and clan disputes on the basis of Sharia and providing a range of social services. This behaviour is mainly represented by the Ahl al-Sunnawa al-Jama'a (ASJ) Salafist Society, the Legitimate Committee for Conflict Resolution in North Sinai (LCCR), and approximately five other smaller organisations.

Two regional developments affected the militant scene in Sinai in the 2000s. The first was the 2007 battle for Gaza between Hamas and Fatah. This led to a forced migration of Fatah police and intelligence officers, including Preventive Security officials to the peninsula. The conflict in Gaza, partly waged along clan, ideological and political lines, was exported to Sinai, stoking the existing polarisation. The second was the 2009 Hamas crackdown on Salafist-jihadist figures and organisations, most notably the bombing of the Ibn Taymiyyah mosque and the killing of Abd al-Latif Moussa, one of the Salafist-jihadist figures who declared an "Islamic Emirate" in Palestinian Rafah. The crackdown led to a wave of migration of many Salafist-jihadist affiliates—with some paramilitary training and experience—into Sinai.

A series of attacks were conducted in 2010 and, in January 2011, the bombing of the Two Saints Church in Alexandria was blamed on Islam's Army, a Gaza-based organisation with some affiliates in Egyptian Rafah, by General Habib al-Adly, Mubarak's Minister of Interior. But after the 2011 revolution, the Egyptian General-Prosecutor motioned a case against al-Adly to the State Security Prosecutor to investigate allegations of his involvement and an SSI "Special Squad" in the bombing.[3]

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis

ABM has emerged as the most capable Sinai-based, armed Salafist-jihadist organisation in Egypt. Between February and July 2011, the organisation blew up the pipeline exporting gas to Israel more than ten times. In late July 2011, ABM issued a 30-minutes, high-resolution documentary entitled *If You*

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Return, We Return. It outlined the reasons for the attacks and the details of the operations. From August 2011 onwards, the organisation launched a series of attacks against Israel, most notably in Eilat in August 2011 and on IDF soldiers in September 2012. Following the post-coup crackdowns, most notably on the Rabaa sit-in in August 2013, ABM was at war with Egyptian security and military forces. ABM reformulated its narrative following the crackdowns to portray its attacks as a revenge for the women and children killed during the security operations. These operations included an assassination attempt on General Mohammed Ibrahim, the Minister of Interior, in Cairo (September 2013), the bombing of the military intelligence building in al-Isamilia (September 2013) and the bombings in Cairo and al-Daqahiliyya Security Directorates (December 2013). Most of these attacks were directed at targets related to the crackdowns of July and August. The Minister of Interior is perceived as the principal actor behind the Rabaa massacre. The Daqahiliyya Security Directorate is in Mansoura, a city where an attack by security forces and civilian-clothed "thugs" on an anti-coup women's march that left four female protestors dead. ABM's most sophisticated attack came in January 2014, when the organisation was able to shoot down a second field army helicopter.

Counter-insurgency (COIN) and counter-terrorism (CT) efforts

Under the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) (February 2011-June 2012) and President Mohammed Morsi (June 2012-July 2013), a mix of COIN and CT tactics were employed. For the first time since 1967, the Egyptian armed forces were deployed in demilitarised Zone C, in coordination with Israel. Operation Eagle 1 (August 2011) and Eagle 2 (August 2012) were both military-security sweeps conducted following the killings of Egyptian border guards in Sinai. The two operations did not end the attacks. They mainly suffered from limited ground intelligence and Mubarak-era practises that undermined the security efforts and alienated the population, including alleged revenge arrests and settling of old scores between security officers, tribal leaders, and Islamists. However, under Field Marshal Tantawi and President Morsi, vindicated suspects were admittedly released much more quickly than under Mubarak. Some soft tactics were employed as well during the periods of Tantawi and Morsi, including mediation by former jihadists-turned-politicians. The Islamic Group's Construction and Development Party, for example, developed a policy document to de-escalate the situation and submitted it to the defense and interior ministries as well as to the presidency. The Nour Party, the political wing of the Salafist Call in Alexandria took another initiative that included several, three-day lecture

series of what can be qualified as counter-jihadism and counter-takfirism events.

Israel has employed some hard CT tactics, although contrary to the Egyptian army and security forces its operations did not employ any collective punishment or entail casualties aside from the suspect(s). Israeli-targeted killings included an operation on 26 August 2012 that led to the blowing up of a motorcycle and the death of its owner, Ibrahim 'Uwaid, an ABM commanders in the village of Khriza. Another operation was a drone strike on 9 August 2013 that killed four members of ABM. The funeral of the four members showed the level of popular support of ABM in northeast Sinai, when hundreds of cars and tens of vans lined up on the way to the funeral to pay respect.

Conclusion

The current crisis in Sinai has the potential to endure and escalate. The death of Shadi al-Mena'i, a 24-year-old leading figures in ABM, and other security arrangements undermine the capacity of the organisation. But they are not likely to end Sinai's armed insurgency as the factors that gave rise to it continue to exist. Any of the models of armed organisations on volatile borders, however, like that of Hizballah (full state-sponsorship), Lashkar-e-Taiba (partial state-sponsorship) or Chechen mujahedeen groups in Pankisi Gorge are not likely to develop in Sinai.

A major issue that will affect Sinai is the current extreme political polarisation across Egypt. The level of tolerance of repression, and even the eradication of the "political other", have reached unprecedented levels in Egypt's modern history. Atrocities were committed against unarmed civilians by the security forces with no likelihood that the perpetrators would be prosecuted. That type of environment does not only increase the recruitment pool for organisations like ABM, but also gives credibility to their respective narrative and ideology.

The Main Forces Behind Secular Politics in the Middle East

Secularism in the Middle East constitutes yet another problematic concept to be assessed accurately. This concept came to the Muslim world in the company of other related terms—such as progress, modernity, Westernisation and democracy—within the context of colonialism. Yet, it has managed to spread in the Middle East at the hands of nationalist elites, influenced by secular education and secular models of developments. Georgetown University professor John Esposito states that the post-independence era witnessed a strong wave of secularism in the region, though to varying degrees.

> *The post-independence period witnessed the emergence of modern Muslim states whose pattern of development was heavily influenced by and indebted to Western secular paradigms or models. Saudi Arabia and Turkey reflected the two polar positions. Saudi Arabia was established as a self-proclaimed Islamic state based upon the Shari`ah (Islamic law). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ataturk (Mustafa Kamal) created a secular Turkish Republic. The vestiges of the Ottoman Empire—the Caliph/Sultan, the Shari`ah, Islamic institutions and schools—were replaced by European-inspired political, legal and educational systems.*[4]

Generally speaking, secularisation in the Middle East has had profound implications. It has changed the basis of identity and the structures of the state and society in many countries. This essay explains briefly the main forces behind secular politics in the region and the lasting support they command. It examines five main elements: the forces of modernisation, the nation-state, national identity, ideology and political parties. Some constitute strengths while others are sources of weakness.

Modernisation as a secularising force

Despite the vigorous debate about the success or failure of the modernisation paradigm, its impact as a force behind secular politics has been profound. On the surface, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran has dealt a severe blow to the main premises of modernisation theory (the linear imperative; the mutually exclusive nature of modernity and traditions; modernisation as a catalyst for change that brings good things). However, many of the modernisation tools have taken roots and

are now an essential part of the daily debate between Islamists and secularists. The most notable example is the acceptance of Western models of political practises by both sides (except for marginal groups). It might take an Islamic overtone, but stops short of calling for the restoration of an Islamic caliphate. Often the discourse focuses on the nation-state, the "civil state", citizenship, democracy, political parties and elections. Many Islamists parties adopt, for varying reasons, secular names: Justice and Development, Freedom and Justice; Construction and Development, Motherland (al-Watan) or the Banner. Their internal structures and practises resemble those of secular parties: a shura council (parliament), elections, and majority rule. We can refer to this as the attempt to reassert Islam in society through secular frameworks.

The nation-state

As a concept. In contrast to the Islamic experience, the nation-state is a secular construct that replaced the transnational Islamic entity (the Islamic caliphate or Islamic state). The Islamic state for centuries had rested on a community that shared a common belief. The nation-state has become a well-entrenched secular concept accepted by both secularists and most Islamists. These Islamists often refer to the particularities of the religious and activist experiences, expressed in territorial or geographic context (the Tunisia 'Islamic" experience or Tunisian "particularity", Sudanese "Islamic" experience, Saudi, Kuwaiti or Iraqi).

As structures. The Western-inspired structures of the nation-state constitute another formidable force, and perhaps the most lasting ones, behind secular politics. The acceptance of these structures by both secularists and Islamists is remarkable. Liberals, socialists, Islamists, Salafists all accept the constitution as the fundamental source for guiding political life and practises. They might compete to enshrine their ideological preferences in it, but at the end they all demonstrate respect for that secular document. These constitutions reflect a specific Western experience of diffusion of power that is readily accepted in the majority of Middle Eastern societies. Most notably this includes a republican orientation (including the Islamic Republic of Iran); the three branches of government; separation of powers; a parliament; and political parties.

Militaries. Middle Eastern militaries have been a main force behind secular politics. Historically, they have been among the early institutions to be exposed to modernisation and Westernisation. Most receive Western or Western-style training and function as a separate institution from the rest of society. In most Middle Eastern militaries, officers and

soldiers with religious tendencies are closely monitored and are purged if necessary. The main doctrine of these secular armies rests on defending the nation-state and its secular structures.

National identity

The ongoing debate concerning national identity in Middle Eastern society reflects another force behind secular politics in the region. With the exception of a few countries, there is an underlying feeling, especially among the elites, of a torn identity: Islamic or religious and non-religious/secular. There is a growing realisation, and in some cases acceptance, that the components of national identity are diverse and compounded and trace their roots to religious as well as secular origins. For example, the king of Morocco always took pride in the multiple identity and cultural diversity of his country. He is the Commander of the Faithful and a graduate of the Sorbonne; converses and is eloquent in both French and classical Arabic; and his country lies in the heart of Africa and only a mile away from Europe. Even the Islamic Republic of Iran is no exception. During the early years of the Iraq-Iran war, Imam Khomeini had to resurrect the Iranian secular past and incite a deep sense of secular nationalism among his fellow countrymen to continue the war against secular Iraq.

The ongoing debate concerning national identity in Middle Eastern society reflects another force behind secular politics in the region.

Ideological force

The weakest aspect of Middle Eastern secularism is its ideological framework. In predominantly Muslim societies where religion is a main component of people's culture, secular ideologies (liberal or leftist) are still being viewed as alien and incoherent, and posing a threat to the fundamental political and social constructs of society. Charles Smith writes, "In contrast [to the Western experience] the Islamic experience has been one of secularism as an ideology imposed from outside by invaders, a product of European imperialism and its extension of foreign culture initiated at the beginning of the 19th century"[5]. Before the 19th and 20th centuries, the term *`almaniyah* did not have a synonym in the Arabic language. Even the term as it is more commonly pronounced in the Middle East today is misleading and confused. Secularism, in Arabic is pronounced as "*`ilmaniyah* (from *`ilm*-science) or "*`al-*

`almaniyah* (from *`alam-world), which may be more accurately rendered by the word "*dunyawiyah*," meaning that which is worldly, mundane or temporal.[6]

It is no surprise that most studies on secularism in the Middle East start with a typical, cliché routine seeking to define secularism. A century and a half after the introduction of secularism to the region, secular intellectuals are still polemical and continue to adopt an archaic perspective of secularism, that is, separation of religion and state (surprisingly still expressed by some Muslim secular intellectuals as separation between church and state, with emphasis on the dominance of the clergy as one of the great obstacles to reform in the region). Very few have transcended this classical, self-defeating approach to focus on secularism as a way of restructuring the relationship between state and society; reasserting the civil society; freeing religion from state manipulation; and even redrawing the boundaries of authority at the state and societal levels.

Secular political parties

Secular parties exist in large numbers in the Middle East, but their impact is marginal and rarely matches the influence of Islamist parties or movements. Most of these parties can be classified into three main categories: liberal, leftist and pan-Arabist. They, perhaps with the exception of the latter, do not command a large following. They are often perceived as elitist, alienated and ideologically ineffectual. The popular uprisings of 2011 provided secular parties with a great opportunity to reproduce themselves, promote their values and increase their influence in society, but so far they have been unable to capitalise on that opportunity in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia. They are hurt by their close association with repressive regimes, deadly Machiavellianism, internal rivalry, inadequate efforts on the ground and lack of coordination among themselves to secure reasonable electoral results.

Conclusion

The legacy of secularism as a force in Middle Eastern politics is mixed and convoluted. At the societal level, there is a mixture between secular and non-secular values. According to a Gallup survey, 74% of those surveyed would like to be ruled by Sharia, but not by religious authorities. The role of religious scholars is increasingly becoming focused on narrow religious issues. Even popular preachers (Amr Khaled and Mostafa Hosni) focus on individual religiosity. Clearly, the ones that speak about religion as a

vehicle for social and political change are the Islamists. Despite the weakness of its ideological formulations and the ineffectiveness of most secular political parties, the lasting support secularism commands lies in certain values that have become well enshrined in society and in state structures. Several concepts have taken root and now guide the political debate in the region, such as citizenship, democracy, republic, and "civic" state. Western-inspired secular structures have become widely accepted and guide political practises among contending groups.

Islamist/Non-Islamist Polarisation in North Africa

At the beginning of 2011, starting in the Tunisian hinterland, popular uprisings spread like wildfire, from Egypt to Libya, Bahrain, Syria, then Yemen. Virtually no Arab country was left untouched by the wave of contestation that surged across the region. Whatever the particularities of each country, there was a sentiment of a shared predicament across the region; a sense that ageing regimes were vulnerable, particularly as many faced unresolved questions of leadership succession. There was a shared widespread outrage about the common features of these regimes: corruption, cronyism, incompetence, etc. Broadcast and social media created a shared emotional space that was overwhelmingly positive towards these uprisings, dubbed Arab Spring or Arab Awakening.

The returns of this revolutionary wave three years later have thus far been meager. In many places gains made in 2011 have been reversed or the situation has evolved from revolutionary fervour to chaos, major setbacks for democracy and the rule of law, or the devastation of prolonged conflict. Even in the one remaining bright light of the region, Tunisia, political tensions continue to simmer, even if at least there is now greater consensus on how to manage them. Some speak of counter-revolution, but these tensions exist even in places where the old regimes have been definitively defeated, such as Libya.

The core feature of the current Arab landscape is polarisation—deep divisions in the political classes and societies of these countries that are pushing each side to the extremes. In the process, this polarisation is taking the oxygen out of the fledgling pluralistic political landscapes that emerged in 2011, asphyxiating more moderate voices and encouraging a winner-takes-all approach by political actors.

Polarisation as a new regional rift line

In North Africa, this polarisation takes place in a different fashion from country to country, but it is overwhelmingly cast in terms of Islamists vs. non-Islamists. This terminology is kept deliberately vague here because the term Islamists describes a wide range of political actors, as does non-Islamists (a negative definition that is nonetheless preferable to liberal or secularists since in places like Libya those defined as such bear no resemblance to their Western counterparts and indeed may very well be religious conservatives.)

The ground zero of this divide is Egypt, particularly after the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi on 3 July 2013, an event that has introduced a new rift in an already troubled region. This rift is as important as some of the region's more long-standing dividing lines, such as the Israeli-Arab conflict or the Sunni-Shia divide, and intersects (in sometimes contradictory ways) with newer nodes of regional conflict, such as the tragedy unfolding in Syria. This new fault line, sure to remain after Morsi's ouster and the launch by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) of a regional campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood in February 2014, is likely to be one of the major structural features of regional geopolitics for years to come.

Together, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pushed Arab League members to declare the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation under Arab counter-terrorism agreements. This has failed, not only in countries where Brotherhood affiliates are in positions of political influence and this approach is formally rejected, in Tunisia and Libya but also among close allies to Riyadh such as Jordan and Morocco, where the Brotherhood either has local affiliates or Islamists are part of government coalitions.

The cases of Tunisia and Libya, in particular, highlight some of the possible outcomes of this drive by the historic Arab leaders to push back, or crush altogether, the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, the pressure on Ennahda—winner of a plurality of seats in the 2011 elections that is likely to repeat its electoral success in 2014—both from inside the country and outside has been tremendous. This pressure has persuaded Ennahda to moderate its ambitions, and even share power in a three-party coalition set up as a result of the 2013 National Dialogue. This decision was informed by local dynamics, to be sure (notably the presence of strong secular counterparts among civil society, namely the trade union federation) but was also very much influenced by events in Egypt, which changed Ennahda's calculations and enabled the party's leadership to convince its base that a strategic retreat was necessary despite the many concessions they felt they had already made.

It is not clear the same approach will continue. Elections will be held by the end of 2014, and while Ennahda is already signaling its preference for a national unity government of some kind, its choice of which presidential candidate to back and whether it will shy from contesting every seat in parliamentary elections remain unclear. Among the factors it must consider is Tunisia's dire need of financial aid, and that the likeliest donors are the Gulf countries—currently signaling they would not help a government that includes Ennahda. Some secular politicians

are already calling on Ennahda to moderate its ambitions in the parliamentary elections for the sake of the country. This is a difficult decision for it to make, in view of the expectations of its base and its electoral success as a democratic guarantee against the return of the repression of Islamists that traumatised the country in the 1990s.

Likewise, the Libyan arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Justice and Construction Party perceive the regional setting as extremely hostile. Their approach in recent months has been the opposite of that of Ennahda: they have sought, with various allies, to consolidate their power ahead of parliamentary elections planned for June 2014, and has made no concessions. The challenge they face at the regional level may indeed be more existential: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may simply not accept that an oil-rich Arab country is governed by a branch of the Brotherhood. In an increasingly chaotic domestic situation, Libyan Islamists are convinced that their opponents (former regime loyalists, secularists, ethnic groups like the Toubou and new political movements like the Federalists) are receiving political and material support from the Gulf and Egypt. The rise of an anti-Islamist coalition willing to use violence to dislodge Islamists from power, led by retired general Khalifa Hiftar, had further confirmed this in late May 2014.

To what extent is this really about Islamism?

This divide over Islamism is based on fundamental differences. There are deep and genuine differences of views on the role and nature of the state, on social mores, on judicial systems, and more. These differences may be irreconcilable in the long term. But for the most part, not enough time has elapsed for Islamists, or at least the non-violent component of the Islamist spectrum, to impose their vision of the world in any significant manner.

The ideological Islamist- non-Islamist divide, then, is only the tip of a much bigger iceberg. Other non-ideological battles are also being fought by these political forces, old and new, that emerged in the post-revolutionary countries of North Africa.

At the core are questions of state reform and state capture. Islamists were by definition outsiders to the state elites in 2011. The latter had carried out, or facilitated, their repression—particularly by the security services and the judiciary. Most Islamists had a radical vision of state reform, in some cases advocating a complete overhaul that had little to do with their Islamist ideology, and they were joined in this by secular revolutionaries. But they also sought to use their electoral successes to

capture a share of state resources that were controlled by former regime elites. Consider some examples:

- In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's attempt to reform the judiciary caused a massive backlash, prompting judges to counter with politically-driven rulings such as the June 2012 disbanding of parliament by the Supreme Constitutional Court. This in turn pushed President Morsi to attempt to steamroll past the judiciary in November 2012, when he suspended the ability of the country's courts to review elections or the committee tasked with writing a new constitution;
- In Tunisia, Ennahda appointed over 11,000 loyalists to positions across the state apparatus. This was done in part to reverse a historical bias against the party, but also to secure clientelist networks inside the state that would be crucial in future elections; and
- In Libya, the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party, Salafist politicians as well as revolutionaries of various stripes demanded not just the overhaul of the army and police, but their complete replacement as they did not trust what survived of the old security institutions.

(...) integrating tightly knit, previously excluded, movements into formal politics is creating new conflicts over the control of state institutions and the symbolic or material resources they afford.

The current regional narrative of polarisation, in other words, is only partly based on genuine ideological differences. Equally important is the fact that integrating tightly knit, previously excluded, movements into formal politics is creating new conflicts over the control of state institutions and the symbolic or material resources they afford.

The Politics of Islam in the Middle East

There is a growing recognition that secular forces have not produced great individual leaders, there is a rising polarisation within society on the very issue of what is the role of religion in government and society and geopolitical factors have aggravated domestic rifts in the region.

I will discuss these broad conclusions and further contextualise what I see as key issues of concern. On the first point, indeed we have witnessed the rise of an anti-Islamist current in the Middle East like never before. One can point to both Egypt and Tunisia, but also Syria, Libya, and Gulf countries, where there is a renewed clampdown on Islamist currents and a challenge posed by secularists to Islamists about their proper role in government and society. The challenge I see with many of these issues, is the underlying question of whether the secularists are able to create an effective challenge to Islamists and the narrative of Islam and politics at the ballot box. Can secular movements or political parties for that matter garner public support for their views without resorting to the heavy hand of the authoritarian state or deep state? Can they legitimately carve a political role for themselves as something more than being in opposition to the very raison d'être of Islamism? Moreover, how much of this is a branding problem for secularists, who rightly or wrongly, are deemed by many Middle Eastern societies to translate into 'godless' folk. As it stands, few secularists have been able to overcome the negative societal portrayal of their movements as either Western-inspired or as atheist movements which do not have mass appeal in conservative societies. Let us not forget as well that Islamists take advantage of this ambiguity to their own advantage. Secularism is an easy target for critics, because of this negative branding and for the implicit connection or support they have from elements of the deep state.

On the second point, the rise of polarisation in Middle East societies around the role of Islam in politics has not been resolved. There remains a deep suspicion of many within the broader public that Islamists movements operate in the shadows, have cultish characteristics and are not loyal to the state but rather to a larger *ummah*. These are also ill-founded but resonate quite nicely in mainstream media and government propaganda that is so often infused with nationalist rhetoric. The Egyptian military has further polarised society by using such rhetoric to frame the current political impasse in Egypt, where they are the valiant guards of the integrity of the state on the one hand, and the disloyal Muslim Brotherhood on the other. The current wave of bombings by radical groups throughout Egypt are advertised as caused by Muslim

Brotherhood supporters, further demonising Islamist movements. One needs to remember, however that Islamist parties failed at governing and that should be a way to counter their strength. After all, the Islamists movements for decades simplified governing to the motto "Islam is the solution" while offering nothing substantively new to the debate over policy choices. Once in power the Brotherhood unveiled a 100-day plan that was quickly undermined by Egypt's complex political, social and economic reality.

The simplistic nature of Islamist parties' policy plans was not the only problem; the reality is these plans were in fact similar in their political and economic vision of Egypt. They perpetuated the status quo in economic policies, for example, by continuing the same-old discussions with the International Monetary Fund. In this, Islamists were found to be no different than any other political actor when facing an economic crisis: they lean on the international financial system which dictates to them the needs of restructuring and fixing the economic situation. While some will contend that Islamists and previous regimes were very different, I would argue they use the same top-down tactics. They are supportive of big capital, do not have a bottom-up business policy and value order and stability. These are hierarchical institutions which, in the Egyptian sense, still give deference to elders. While these are not inherently problematic, they did not meet the expectations of the Egyptian people for fundamental change. This is one of the underlying reasons that the Muslim Brotherhood failed and I suspect so will the military-controlled government of today.

By shifting the Islamist discourse to things like how long your beard should be, how long your pants should be, or similar issues, the Salafists, and by extension the Saudis, wish to undermine the political power of the Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood.

Another key point is the rise of geopolitical fault lines in the region that have used Islamist politics. While some have noted the Saudi aggression towards the Muslim Brotherhood for their cosiness to Iran or their call for democratic governance which would challenge the core raison d'être of the Saudi regime, there is another aspect of this power battle that is problematic. The Saudis are funding Salafists in the region who are inspired or even trained by Wahhabist interpretations of Islam. These movements are ironically depoliticising religion. Salafists may dominate the new Islamic discourse with their focus on individual piety and moral behaviour. By shifting the Islamist discourse to things like how long your beard should be, how long your pants should be, or similar issues, the Salafists, and by extension the Saudis, wish to undermine the political power

of the Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. This is not necessarily a positive development in the long term as Salafists have also shown to be intolerant to many other movements and political stripes. Their appeal to a narrow few may help undermine the short-term Islamist movement for political power, but their long-term effect on undermining pluralism, minority rights, diversity and overall liberal political thought is not a positive development for the region.

Finally, Islamists today are torn. There are no longer any good models. With the Turkish system in political turmoil thanks to the arrogance of Prime Minister Erdogan, the AKP party has developed a negative reputation in the Arab world. Similarly, the Muslim Brotherhood's short-term rule in Egypt under the embarrassing presidency of Morsi was a failed experiment in the most populous Arab country. While Tunisia's Ennahda looks like the most responsible player by moving aside in favour of a care-taker government to avoid an Egyptian scenario, making them the most mature political player in the Islamist camp, they still have not earned the respect to govern among many Tunisians and their fate makes them an unlikely role model. Perhaps there is room here to learn from the Asian examples of Malaysia and others, but for now the Islamists movements have been beaten ideologically and militarily and the future of politics and Islam remains uncertain.

Cast Adrift: Saudi Arabia Confronts a Changing Middle East

These are troubling and uncertain times for Saudi diplomacy. The first round of malaise occurred in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings, which Saudi Arabia saw as opening a Pandora's Box of politicised Islam, sectarianism and tribalism, Iranian influence, and Al-Qaeda. It steadily escalated into a series of disagreements with the US over regional order and strategies to manage the surrounding chaos.

On the editorial pages of Saudi newspapers, columnists have sounded familiar themes with new levels of intensity: the Gulf is being shut out of regional negotiations on Iran; the United States is being duped by Syria, Iran and Egypt's Brotherhood; the Gulf needs to adopt a more muscular, unilateral approach to safeguard its own interests, and it should cultivate new security patrons to compensate for US capriciousness, perfidy and retreat from the region.

In recent months, Saudi Arabia has attempted to enforce a degree of uniformity among the historically fractious states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—making plans for a unified Gulf military command and attempting to rally a Gulf embargo against Qatar because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood. But Saudi hopes for a watertight Gulf consensus are likely to prove elusive—the Gulf states have long shown a preference for bilateralism in their dealings with outside powers, whether the US or Iran.

Saudi handwringing belies a hidden subtext: the fear that Saudi security and legitimacy are not only being imperilled at the regional level, but domestically. This is an oft-neglected dimension of how the Saudis view the Middle East—the belief that ideological threats emanating from beyond the kingdom's borders, whether the politicised Islam proffered by the Muslim Brotherhood, Shia activism, democratisation or transnational jihadism, have the potential to mobilise internal opposition to the al-Saud.

Syria

The interlinked concerns of domestic and regional security are especially evident in Syria. Saudi Arabia's strategic rivalry with Iran is the principal geopolitical interest driving its intervention in Syria. The al-Assad regime's close ties to Iran had long been an affront to Saudi Arabia's claim to Arab leadership on Levantine and Palestinian issues; prior to

2011, Riyadh had unsuccessfully used a mix of diplomatic pressure and persuasion to try and wrest Syria from Iran's orbit. The anti-Assad uprising offered Saudi Arabia a new opportunity to roll back Iran's influence in the region. It was a chance to recover from the humiliating "loss" of Iraq and, perhaps more importantly, from Lebanon, where in 2008 Tehran effectively upstaged Riyadh when Hizballah forces routed Saudi-backed Hariri factions in west Beirut.

There are a number of other fronts for Saudi Arabia in the Syria war, all with high stakes for Riyadh's regional standing and domestic security. Saudi Arabia seeks to blunt the rise of transnational Al-Qaeda actors with the capability and intent to threaten the kingdom. At the same time, Riyadh is keen to see that Brotherhood factions with the Syrian opposition are kept marginalised in any post-Assad settlement. With the smaller Gulf states' growing support for Syria's opposition, Saudi Arabia has used the Syrian war to reassert its primacy within the GCC and, in particular, check the growing assertiveness of Qatar.

Iraq

If, in Saudi eyes, America's sin of omission in Syria has been to Iran's benefit, America's sin of commission in Iraq—the 2003 removal of then-Iraqi president Saddam Hussein—was an enormous gift to Tehran. But rather than aggressively contend with Iranian power as it does in the Levant, Saudi Arabia has pursued a passive policy of static containment or damage control in Iraq. Given the country's Shia majority, Saudi officials privately concede that they are playing a losing game in trying to stem Tehran's influence, bereft of the local networks, access, and capacity that Iran enjoys.

It is likely that Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will continue to be reticent and ambivalent with regards to improving their relations with Iraq, even if Iraqi popular sentiment turns against Iran. In this sense, Washington's long-standing hopes of convincing the Gulf Arab states to productively engage with Iraq to counter-balance Iran are ultimately misplaced. The best that can be hoped for is that Iraq will become a buffer zone between Riyadh and Tehran, rather than an arena of open competition.

Egypt

The fall of Morsi produced a near-seismic shift in Saudi policy towards Egypt, resulting in a USD 12-billion injection of funds to the al-Sisi-backed

government by Riyadh, along with Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The crackdown widened a chasm between Washington and Riyadh over Egypt—and the broader regional order—that had first emerged with the fall of the Mubarak regime. Although the United States solicited Saudi and UAE back-channel help in imploring al-Sisi to reach a peaceful compromise with Morsi, there is ample evidence that the Gulf states were working at cross-purposes with Washington. King Abdullah later lambasted Washington for naïveté about the Brotherhood's true face as a "terrorist" organisation.

Although the Brotherhood is technically banned in Saudi Arabia, a number of prominent Salafist clerics from the so-called Sahwa (Awakened) share similar doctrinal beliefs with the movement. Several of these figures lambasted the crackdown and called for political reconciliation rather than repression—a stark departure from the official Saudi line. Ironically, the crackdown on Morsi prompted the very politicisation of clerical discourse in the kingdom that the Saudis were hoping to avoid when the Brotherhood was in power.

The Iran nuclear deal and its regional effect

Saudi officials have reacted cynically and suspiciously to Iranian President Rouhani's charm offensive. Indeed, the interim nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Tehran effectively formalised a catastrophe the Saudis long feared was coming: a bait-and-switch that bought Tehran time on the nuclear front while empowering Iranian nefariousness across the region, particularly in Syria. In the face of unreliability from America, senior Saudi officials have been uncharacteristically public about advocating a more muscular and independent Saudi policy in order to step up the battle against Iran.

While Iran and Saudi Arabia are destined to remain regional competitors, the question is whether their competition must manifest itself in protracted conflict, or whether they can settle on a peaceful modus vivendi—what US President Obama recently called a Gulf-Iran "equilibrium" in a little-noticed but important interview with the New Yorker.[7] Washington's bilateral relations with both Riyadh and Tehran will prove critical in finding a recipe for such equilibrium. That being said, it is probably counter-productive for the US and the West to encourage Saudi Arabia and Iran to mend their ties, given the degree of elite factionalism in each country.

Confronted with warming US-Iranian ties and the rest of the Gulf's improving relations with Tehran, the Saudis may be compelled to start

their own unilateral overtures toward the Islamic Republic. But, given the ferocity of the Syria conflict and the current outlook of elites in both states, these initiatives are likely to remain extremely limited in scope. Much will hinge upon Iran's willingness to de-escalate and diminish its involvement in the Levant to a degree that is acceptable—from a face-saving point of view—to more pragmatic elements in the Saudi regime. But given the current strength of the Principlists in Tehran and the Revolutionary Guards, this scenario does not seem likely over the near and medium term.

Regardless of the type of regime in Tehran, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states will continue to demand external military backing to balance what they see as Iran's inherent hegemonic aspirations.

The most important obstacle to a real improvement in ties is the inescapable reality of the Gulf's structural disequilibrium. Regardless of the type of regime in Tehran, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states will continue to demand external military backing to balance what they see as Iran's inherent hegemonic aspirations. Iran, for its part, will continue to demand a Gulf that is free from foreign forces so that it can assert its rightful leadership role. In that sense, the notion that the Gulf could witness a new, more constructive balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia that could facilitate a US disengagement is a distant dream.

The future of US-Saudi relations

Saudi warnings of US impotence in the face of regional threats, moves toward unilateralism, and solicitation of new security patrons are hardly new. If history is any guide, Saudi Arabia will continue to pursue policies that align with the broad contours of US strategy—but with a creeping preference for hedging and unilateralism that will, in some cases, clash with US interests. But at the end of the day, Washington is still the only game in town. None of the kingdom's potential suitors has the real capacity or will power to replace the US—although countries such as Pakistan, France, China and India can fill certain niche security capabilities.

Much has been made of America's energy independence leading to a cooling of US-Saudi Arabia relations. To be sure, a number of new trends are challenging Saudi Arabia's long-time oil primacy. Riyadh faces a shortage of global demand, the re-entry of Libyan crude oil on to the global market and increased production from Iran with the easing of sanctions. If and when Iraq reaches its full production potential, Saudi standing could

slip further. US shale production, which is expected to peak in 2018, may force further cuts in OPEC production over the next several years. That being said, these trends should not be overstated. Saudi Arabia retains enormous power as a swing producer and its oil exports are critical to the economic health of global heavyweights like China, upon which the economies of the United States and Europe depend. Such linkages mean that Washington will continue to remain engaged in the protection of Saudi supplies regardless of US shale output.

Finally, it should be remembered that the road to a real, game-changing breakthrough in US-Iranian relations—to say nothing of a more modest nuclear détente—will be longer and more uncertain than both Saudi alarmists and Washington optimists believe. If and when it occurs, its effect on US-Saudi relations and the broader region is likely to be less seismic and transformative than is commonly assumed.

Iran's Political and Security Calculations in the Region

Is President Hassan Rouhani pursuing different nuclear and foreign policies than his predecessor, or is he a sheep in wolf's clothing? To answer this question, I will first offer my analysis of the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany), and will then discuss the possible implications of a final nuclear agreement on the orientation of Iranian regional policies.

Why did Iran come to the negotiating table?

Iran has come to the negotiating table because its highest authorities made a strategic decision in 2013 to conclude a nuclear agreement with the West in exchange for the lifting of the US/EU sanctions. Clearly, there are powerful forces in Iran, the US and the Middle East that can and want to derail the nuclear negotiations. Still I am cautiously optimistic and give it a 60/40 chance that the two sides will sign a permanent nuclear agreement within the next year. I will not, of course, be totally surprised if these talks fail.

There continues to be considerable skepticism about the Interim Nuclear Agreement (the Joint Plan of Action) signed by Iran and P5+1 in November 2013. Much of that skepticism is expressed by the advocates of regime change in Iran who insist that the crippling US/EU sanctions targeting Iran's financial institutions and oil and gas industries compelled Tehran to come to the negotiating table. They accuse Iran of being congenitally deceptive, using negotiations as a stalling tactic to dupe the West as it surreptitiously strives to build a nuclear bomb. For them, Iran must not be allowed to enrich uranium on its own soil or have a peaceful nuclear program, which is, as US President Obama has observed, unrealistic. To achieve these goals, they propose to intensify the existing sanctions, add new ones, and apply a credible threat of force against Iran.

Unquestionably, the crippling sanctions were a major, but not the sole, factor that brought Iran to the table. For one thing, Ahmadinejad's misguided policies wreaked much economic havoc, particularly in the last two years of his nightmarish presidency (2005-13). This is not to deny the devastating impact of the sanctions on the Iranian economy; rather, it is to suggest that the sanctions left no discernible impact on Iran's nuclear program. Despite the sanctions, threats of force by the US and Israel, computer sabotage and the assassination of a few nuclear scientists, Iran made impressive advancements in the past nine years: The number of

centrifuges increased from about 1,400 to more than 19,000 (9,000-10,000 operating); it mastered the technology to enrich uranium to 20%; it built new facilities at Fordow and Arak and it expanded its estimated USD 100-billion nuclear infrastructure.

Another major factor in bringing Iran to the negotiating table was the election of President Rouhani in 2013. Rouhani, supported by former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami and reformists, campaigned to improve the deteriorating economic conditions, resolve Iran's nuclear impasse with the West, end the sanctions, moderate Iranian foreign policy and improve relations with the US. There were other candidates who showed no appetite in resolving the nuclear impasse and supported the continuation of Ahmadinejad's confrontational policies. Rouhani won the election with the mandate to reach a nuclear agreement with the West and change the orientation of Iran's foreign policy. While the Oman-mediated secret negotiations between Iran and the US began before Rouhani's victory, it would be naïve to think national security official Saeed Jalili would have signed the Interim Nuclear Agreement, had he been elected president.

What is often conveniently overlooked is the fact that Rouhani's victory changed the balance of power within Iran's highly factionalised and polarised polity in favour of those who seek to resolve the nuclear impasse with the West, reintegrate Iran into the global economy, and even normalise relations with the US. Interestingly, that faction enjoys the support of a large constituency within the electorate. This development can profoundly change Iran's political landscape. It also has created an opportunity the West cannot afford to miss. It would be a tragic strategic miscalculation if we concentrate exclusively on the nuclear issue and remain oblivious to this major development within Iran's elites.

Iran has sought to develop the capacity and the infrastructure to build a bomb, should it decide to do so. In fact, ambiguity about its nuclear capability is exactly where Iran wants to be.

Finally, Iran has come to the negotiating table because the cost of defiance has outweighed the benefits of cooperation with the West. After all, Iran seems to have become a threshold nuclear power—a power with the infrastructure, knowledge, expertise, and technology to build a bomb should it decide to do so. Iran has sought to develop the capacity and the infrastructure to build a bomb, should it decide to do so. In

fact, ambiguity about its nuclear capability is exactly where Iran wants to be.

This is why the issue of break-out time (the time required to build a bomb) has emerged as a major concern of the West in its negotiations with Iran. There are reports that the US believes the breakout time for Iran is now about two months. The US seeks to prolong this time to one year, giving ample time to the West to detect and stop any Iranian initiative to build a nuclear bomb. It is in that spirit that the US has reportedly demanded a major reduction in the number of operating centrifuges, preferably to one-fifth of the current number. Iran, on the other hand, has been talking about increasing the number centrifuges to 50,000, arguing that it cannot be dependent on outside powers, including Russia, for the required fuel for its reactors. The West insists that the major sanctions will not be permanently lifted, but rather will be temporarily suspended so they could be re-imposed should Iran violate the final agreement. The West would prefer to have a permanent agreement for at least a decade, if not more, while Iran seems to look for a much shorter period.

Although Iran seems to be willing to accept the most intrusive inspection of its nuclear program, ultimately the inspection regime would be effective and reliable only if there are powerful elements within the governing elite who are truly committed to a peaceful nuclear program.

These differences are huge, but they can be resolved because both sides seem to have concluded that it is in their interest to resolve the impasse at this moment in history.

Possible impact of a permanent nuclear agreement on Iran's regional policies

For the past few years, Iran has been an emerging regional power that has come to play an important role in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Its regional policies are a reflection of a geo-strategic competition with the US. The key elements of such competition are regime survival, deterrence and expansion of Iranian influence. Iran is developing an effective deterrent capability against the US and Israel, building missiles, pursuing asymmetrical strategies, developing nuclear capability ambiguity, and resorting to terrorism. Iran has sought to create zones of influence in such places as Herat in Afghanistan, southern Lebanon, Syria and southern Iraq. Iran has also supported non-state actors, such as Hizballah in Lebanon, and established an "Axis of

Resistance" against the US and Israel that stretches from Afghanistan to Lebanon.

Although Iran has become a regional power, it is not a classical regional power. It has been a spoiler power—a power that is incapable of imposing its will on others, but is sufficiently powerful to make it extremely costly for global powers to achieve their objectives.

The Rouhani government is aware of the spoiler nature of Iranian power and seeks to gradually transform it into a constructive and engaging regional power. It has been costly for Iran to play this role and there does not seem to be much support for it inside Iran.

Should there be a nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1, the chances of the transformation of Iran into a normal regional power would increase substantially.

Although I remain cautiously optimistic about the possibility of a final nuclear agreement within one year, I am much less optimistic about the prospect of normalisation of US-Iran relations. For one thing, the supreme leader holds real suspicions about US intentions. For another, there are powerful forces in Iran that continue to benefit from the state of "no peace and no war" between Iran and the US and would do what it takes to perpetuate the status quo.

Still, there is a chance that a detente can be established between Iran and the US. As the two countries have some irreconcilable differences as well as common interests, developing an institutional mechanism to manage peacefully their differences and cooperate when their interests converge could become the foundation of this much-needed detente. While much is written about the differences between the two countries, hardly any attention is given to the commonalities they share. Today the two countries share the common strategic goal of establishing political stability in Afghanistan, rebuilding that devastated land, and fighting against narco-trafficking. Iran constructively cooperated with the US to overthrow the Taliban and build the foundation of a new Afghanistan. Despite some of its mischievous and odious behaviour in Iraq, Iran's overall policies in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq have been much less detrimental to US interests than some of Washington's closest regional allies. In Syria, Iran has indeed been the most stalwart supporter of the al-Assad regime, while the US has called for his overthrow. Still, the two countries share the common strategic objective of defeating the Sunni extremists, terrorists and radical jihadists that have alarmingly moved to Syria. In addition, both counties are determined to prevent the total

collapse of the Syrian state, fearing that extremists and jihadists would most likely fill the power vacuum once the state disintegrates.

In short, a US-Iran detente would significantly diminish the lingering tensions between the two countries; help Iran become less of a spoiler power and more of a status quo one; and change the strategic landscape of the Middle East for the better. As US-Russian relations become more intense and competitive, Iran becomes much more valuable to both of them. Rouhani seeks to gradually change the orientation of Iranian foreign policy from "No East, No West" to "Yes East, Yes West," in which Iran actively cooperates with both sides to enhance its own interests.

Israel's Response to the Emergence of Unstable Spaces on its Borders

As a result of a combination of events in the last three years, Israel finds itself facing new and complex security challenges on a number of its borders. In some of these, a long-standing threat has changed in nature or increased in scope. In others, a new enemy or combination of enemies has emerged. In all cases, the new threats are related to the weakening, or potential/actual break-up, of the states facing Israel. The countries in question where these new challenges have emerged are Syria and Egypt, and to a much lesser extent Lebanon.

Syria

In Syria, the three-year civil war has turned what was a hostile but relatively predictable situation into a far more complex one. Israeli thinking on the conflict has gone through a number of phases. Prior to 2011, the al-Assad regime was a charter member of the main regional alliance opposing Israel—the bloc led by Iran. Al-Assad supported Hizballah in Lebanon, acting as a conduit for the provision of Iranian arms to the organisation and a hinterland in times of conflict with Israel. Al-Assad also harboured a number of organisations engaged in active conflict with Israel, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. However, there was a strong current of opinion, particularly notable in the defence establishment, which regarded al-Assad as the weakest link in the pro-Iranian camp, and considered that drawing him away from it, even at the cost of territorial inducements, would constitute a significant strategic blow to this bloc.

Once the uprising began, with the early and clear vital aid afforded the al-Assad regime by the Iranians, this perspective ceased to be relevant. Initially, most in Israel hoped for a swift victory for the rebels, assuming and hoping that the new, Sunni-dominated Syria would then align with the Arab Gulf states which Israel regards as non-hostile and similarly anti-Iranian. This was reflected in public statements by both Prime Minister Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Lieberman expressing support for the fall of the regime. In the first stages of the uprising, Israel also assessed correctly that the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists was relatively minor. Israeli assessments, in common with Western and regional ones, failed however to predict the staying power of the regime. Famously, then-Defence Minister Ehud Barak predicted in December 2011 that the regime would fall within weeks.

In the course of the next year, as the situation in Syria morphed into an armed uprising, Hizballah and Iranian involvement also increased, and the rebellion took on the colours of an increasingly Islamist-dominated insurgency, so Israeli concerns grew. These concerns centred on a number of areas:

- Syrian chemical weapons (CW) capability and the possibility that it could fall into hostile hands on either the pro-regime or rebel side;
- Transfer of sophisticated weapons systems to Hizballah in Lebanon, in particular anti-aircraft systems; and
- Acquisition by jihadist elements of territory adjoining Israel's borders and the possibility of attacks launched by them.

With regards to chemical capabilities, Israel welcomed the 2013 agreement for the collection of Syrian chemical weapons, but remains sceptical regarding the implementation of the agreement.

Regarding the transfer of weapons to Hizballah, Israel has according to reports acted on at least six occasions since January 2013 to prevent Bashar al-Assad's regime from transferring surface-to-sea and surface-to-air missile batteries to Lebanon. One of those occasions occurred on 24 February 2014 in the eastern Bekaa, when Israeli aircraft targeted a suspected Hizballah weapons storage facility.

Hizballah responded for the first time with roadside bombs against Israel Defence Forces (IDF) on 14 and 18 March 2014, presumably because the raid took place a few kilometres inside Lebanon. Israel countered by targeting Syrian army points close to the border; according to the IDF's statement, these included a training facility, military headquarters and artillery batteries.

Clearly, Israeli defence planners concluded that forces on the opposite side were attempting to change the rules of engagement. Israel's response—in a manner familiar on the Lebanese border in the past and in Gaza more recently—was intended to raise the price of increased aggression to a level sufficient to cause the other side to desist from further provocations, without leading to a general deterioration into armed conflict.

For many years prior to 2006, Israel's border with Lebanon was managed in such a fashion—first against the PLO then, from the early 1990s, against Hizballah. Periodic provocations would result in "rounds" of

violence, which would be followed by tense periods of subsequent silence.

It appears likely that the border between Israel and Syria is now set to take on these characteristics, after a long period in which only the conventional armies of Israel and Syria faced one another across the border, and paramilitary activity was outside the rules of the game.

Another source of concern is the presence of Sunni jihadists close to the border. By May 2014 Jabhat al-Nusra had captured the Syrian Army's eastern Tal al-Ahmar (Red Hill) base close to the border with Israel, causing serious concern. It reflects the growing strength of this movement at the expense of Western-backed moderate rebels there; the base overlooks the Golan Heights. On 23 April, pictures emerged showing Jabhat al-Nusra fighters posing with Igla short range anti-aircraft missiles that they found at Tal al-Ahmar. Nusra's kidnapping in early May 2014 of Ahmed Fahad Al-Na'ameh, one of the most senior moderate rebel commanders in Dera'a province and an outspoken critic of Nusra was an additional achievement for the latter. As Nusra's strength grows close to the border, so Israel's army and intelligence services are increasing airborne reconnaissance by drones and aircraft above the movement's positions.

In addition, Israel has in recent months been reaching out to non-jihadist rebel elements. Efforts are made to induce villagers to refuse to cooperate and help the jihadist. Non-jihadist rebel casualties are treated in military hospitals in Israel. A border post for the transfer of these men has been established in the Golan Heights. Lightly wounded men are treated in an Israeli military field hospital on the Golan while those with more serious wounds are taken to Israel. Around 1,000 fighters have been treated in Israel to date. Israeli intelligence officers are also reported to be present in Syrian refugee camps on the border with Jordan, working in close coordination with Jordanian and US counterparts. So the task facing Israel at present is to neutralise or deter these warring forces—Hizballah, al-Assad and the jihadists—while at the same time avoiding if possible being drawn into a direct, unlimited conflict with either.

Lebanon

Hizballah retains its dominant position in Lebanon. The organisation has repaired the damage suffered in the 2006 war. The border has been largely quiet since the war. Indeed, the Lebanese border offers an example of precisely the situation that Israel would prefer but does not

find in Syria or to a lesser extent in Sinai—namely, a clearly dominant single actor which, though hostile to Israel, is also susceptible to deterrence.

Egypt

Northern Sinai has long played host to a variety of smuggling networks and jihadist organisations. Since the military coup of 3 July 2013 in Egypt, however, there has been an exponential increase in attacks emanating from this area. This region is now the home ground for an emergent Islamist insurgency against the Egyptian authorities. Since July 2013, more than 300 reported attacks have taken place in Sinai. The violence is also spreading into the Egyptian mainland, with attacks in early 2014 on a security facility in Cairo, and the killing of an Interior Ministry official in the capital. Some of the groups engaged in the fighting are linked to global jihadist networks, including Al-Qaeda. Others have connections to elements in Hamas-controlled Gaza.

This emergent reality in northern Sinai has serious implications for Israel. While the main focus of the jihadist activity is directed against al-Sisi's administration in Cairo, some of the groups centrally involved have a track record of attacks against Israeli targets. In Al-Qaeda's official propaganda channels, northern Sinai is described as a new front in the war against "the Jews and the Americans".

The most significant group operating in northern Sinai today is the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem) organisation. This organisation has been active since 2011. It originated in Gaza and made its way to Sinai following the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis was responsible for repeated attacks on the el-Arish-Ashkelon gas pipeline in 2011-12, which eventually led to the suspension of supplies via this route. The group also carried out the cross-border terror attack on 18 August 2011, in which eight Israelis were killed, and an additional strike into Israel on 21 September 2012, which took the life of an IDF soldier. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis also claimed responsibility for the rocket attack on Eilat on 20 January 2014. The rocket was intercepted by the Iron Dome system.

The organisation's main focus in recent months has been on increasingly high-profile attacks against Egyptian targets. These have included an attempt on the life of Egyptian Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim on 5 September 2013, and a series of bomb attacks in Cairo in January 2014. On 25 January 2014, the group claimed responsibility for downing a military helicopter over northern Sinai. The weapon used in this attack, a

Russian Igla air-defence system, was reportedly smuggled out of Gaza, where the group maintains links with Salafist-jihadist elements. So what is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis? According to a former militant of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organisation, Nabil al-Naeim, the group is funded by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, following a deal brokered with powerful Brotherhood strongman Khairet al-Shater.

Al-Naeim suggested that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is supplied with weapons by the Brotherhood via the Gaza tunnels and Libya. He maintains that the Hamas authorities in Gaza are aware of the deal. The alleged Brotherhood links were also asserted by Sameh Eid, described in an *al-Arabiyya* article as an expert on Islamist groups. Eid referred to the group as the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and said that Shater had threatened the Egyptian authorities with escalation in Sinai and the targeting of the Egyptian Army. Little hard evidence, however, has yet emerged to support the claims of a direct Muslim Brotherhood link to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.

Clear links between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and the Al-Qaeda network, exist. In testimony to the US House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on 11 February 2014, Tom Joscelyn of the Federation for the Defense of Democracies noted that the group uses Al-Qaeda's official channels for its propaganda—such as al Fajr Media Center.[8]

Also, Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has on many occasions praised its operations. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis also often features Al-Qaeda leaders and 'martyrs', including Osama Bin Laden, in its videos. This shows that at the very least, a clear ideological identification is there, along with probable organisational links at some level.

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is only the most active and prominent of a whole number of jihadist networks operating against the Egyptian authorities from Sinai. Joscelyn in his testimony notes evidence that elements of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) are active in Sinai. He also mentions a third grouping directly linked to Al-Qaeda, the Muhammad Jamal network, as also active on the peninsula.

What does all this add up to? An Islamist insurgency is now under way in northern Sinai. It involves groups with roots in the Gaza Strip. If some accounts are to be believed, both the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Hamas authorities in Gaza are involved in it on one or another level. Almost certainly, the regional networks of Al-Qaeda form a significant

part of it. The Islamists have already begun to strike west into Egypt proper.

For Israel, the emergent insurgency raises the prospect of two de facto Al-Qaeda controlled areas adjoining its border—one in southern Syria and the other in the Salafist playground that northern Sinai has become. The presence of the Hamas authority in Gaza, and the possibility of jihadist elements in northern Sinai operating in cooperation with Hamas against Israel further complicate the picture.

The challenge of deterrence in poorly governed spaces

Where once Syria used fragmented Lebanon as a useful base from which to put pressure on Israel, it may be that Hizballah will now seek to use southern Syria to play a similar role.

Israel's task in both Sinai and Syria is complicated by the absence of a clear central authority in either area—even a hostile one. This renders the building of deterrence far more complex and difficult. In Lebanon, this situation does not prevail, because of the clear dominance of Hizballah in that area. It is fascinating to note that Syria and Lebanon's roles may now have become reversed. Where once Syria used fragmented Lebanon as a useful base from which to put pressure on Israel, it may be that Hizballah will now seek to use southern Syria to play a similar role.

In any case, Israel's task will be to build effective defensive and where necessary aggressive stances in both the south and north, while endeavouring to avoid being sucked into the complex conflicts taking place. In Egypt, this is facilitated by the very good levels of cooperation with the Egyptian security forces. The absence of any coherent or well-established partner to the north, meanwhile, further complicates the situation there.

The Regional Implications of a Revived Al-Qaeda Movement

The Syrian civil war has reversed Al-Qaeda's waning fortunes. Just two or three years ago, the movement appeared to be in terminal decline. Its founder and leader was dead. Its chief radicaliser and recruiter had been killed. A four-fold increase in US drone attacks between 2009 and 2012 had claimed the lives of more other senior commanders and over two hundred foot soldiers. Al-Qaeda conspicuously had no part in the transformative social, political and economic developments of the Arab Spring, seemingly rendering it irrelevant. Indeed, social media and civil protest had achieved what terrorism had manifestly failed to deliver. The movement, as even bin Laden himself recognised, was losing the war of ideas and the struggle for Muslim hearts and minds. Moreover, the longing for democracy and economic reform across North Africa and the Middle East appeared to have decisively trumped repression and violence.

How different it all looks today. Al-Qaeda has arguably achieved the impossible. It has not only revived and resuscitated itself, but it has actually grown and expanded. Despite having suffered the greatest onslaught directed against a terrorist organisation in history, its ideology and brand have actually prospered. Taking advantage of the vacuum of authority created by the upheaval that followed the Arab Spring, and exploiting the proliferation of poorly governed places or patently ungoverned territory particularly along porous national borders, Al-Qaeda has moved swiftly to establish new sanctuaries and safe havens in North and West Africa, the Sinai, and the Levant. Thirty years ago, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that publicity provides the oxygen that terrorists breathe. In Al-Qaeda's case, continued access to sanctuary and safe haven is the oxygen that both sustains it and has enabled the movement to grow. The military coup that toppled the regime of Mohammad Morsi in Egypt has contributed to Al-Qaeda's new found relevance: validating Ayman al-Zawahiri's admonitions about placing any faith in the sanctity of democratic processes.

Today, Al-Qaeda is present in more places than it was on the eve of 11 September 2001. It currently operates in at least sixteen regions or countries: more than double the number of six years ago.[9] And, despite repeated US government proclamations heralding its impending strategic collapse, Core Al-Qaeda has demonstrated a remarkable resilience.

Syria has played a pivotal role in Al-Qaeda's effort both to re-insert itself back into the region's politics and to appear relevant. Syria is regarded as treasured Muslim territory, referred to by the Koran and the site of historical conflict between Sunni and Shia (eg, the Nusayris—the ancient name for the Alawites and Shia). What is today Syria was formerly a province of the Ottoman Empire that was administered from Damascus and included Islam's third holiest shrine—Jerusalem's al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock. It is also geographically contiguous with two of the movement's most hated enemies: the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Jewish state of Israel, therefore presenting tremendously appealing targets for the struggle's next phase.

Syria today has accordingly been described as the "perfect jihadist storm" much like Afghanistan was three decades ago: it has become a magnet for foreign fighters; fighting there has been justified theologically through religious edicts (fatwas); and, many rebel groups, including Al-Qaeda, have benefitted from the largesse of wealthy patrons from the Arabian Peninsula. But a critical distinction between Afghanistan in the late 20th century and Syria in the 21st is the revolution in information technology and communications that has occurred in recent years. In particular, the growth and communicative power of social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc., have been a game-changer in terms of facilitating the pervasive and real-time communication between like-minded radical and potential recruits. It is not uncommon, for instance, for foreign fighters operating in Syria to have thousands of followers on Twitter or Facebook (among other platforms) who receive first-hand, immediate accounts of heroic battles and more mundane daily activities, and are encouraged, invited and summoned to travel to Syria and participate in the holy war against the al-Assad regime and the Shia. Sectarian messaging and clarion calls to battle focus on the eternal struggle between Sunni and Shia and the imperative of resisting Persian domination.

The bloody split between Core Al-Qaeda's designated franchise in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has of course been a serious blow to al-Zawahiri's leadership and the movement's attempts to maintain a united front. At the same time, history has often shown how splits within terrorist movements have led to increased levels of violence and greater bloodshed as factions compete with one another for relevance, support and viability.

There are already indications that Syria's ongoing civil war, coupled with the focus on the use of chemical weapons by both government and opposition forces, has sharpened Al-Qaeda's interests and ambitions to

obtain nerve agents, poison gas and other harmful toxins for use as weapons. For example, in May 2013 Turkish authorities reportedly seized two kilograms of sarin nerve gas—the same weapon used in the 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway system—and arrested twelve men linked to Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. Only days later, another set of sarin-related arrests was made in Iraq of Al-Qaeda operatives in that country who were running two factories to produce both sarin and mustard blistering agents. And, in November 2013, Israel reported that for the previous three years it has been holding a senior Al-Qaeda operative with expertise in biological warfare.

Throughout this period it has become apparent that Core Al-Qaeda has a deeper bench than is believed. The core is able to draw on this to replenish its decimated ranks, often with individuals who, while mostly unknown outside the movement, nonetheless have tremendous credibility within it. Husam Abdul Raouf, Abu Dujanah, and Omar Khalil al Sudani, for instance, are all veterans of the Afghan-Soviet War and, accordingly, each have at least thirty years of experience as mujahedeen fighting the movement's variegated foreign and domestic enemies. Their ascendance within Al-Qaeda to positions of importance demonstrates that, even while the US drone campaign has made deep inroads among the existent Al-Qaeda senior leadership, the movement still possesses the capacity to replace eliminated commanders with competent successors.

To ensure its longevity in other ways involving rank-and-file fighters, Core Al-Qaeda has also begun to diversify its recruitment pool. Today, as-Sahab ("The Clouds"), Al-Qaeda's preternaturally active media and outreach arm, publishes more in Urdu than in Arabic. Indeed, the core has deliberately been recruiting middle- and upper-middle class Pakistanis, often with university degrees in engineering and the hard sciences, into its ranks. Ahmad Faruq, Asim Lumar, and Abu Zar Assami are just some of the Pakistani nationals who have become prominent within the movement.

Ayman al-Zawahiri's appointment of Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the founder and commander of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as Al-Qaeda's deputy commander is indicative of a revitalised strategy to extend the movement's reach deeper into the Middle East and Africa. By creating an ancillary regional headquarters to direct, coordinate and support operations, Core Al-Qaeda is able to project force and exert some coordination and have some influence on battlefields far distant from its South Asian base.

Al-Qaeda has thus sought to think strategically and advance an operational concept designed to ensure its longevity. In this respect, there appear to be three key dimensions to its strategy:

- First, attriting and enervating Washington so that a weakened United States is forced out of the Muslim lands it has invaded and therefore will have neither the will nor the capability to intervene again;
- Second, taking over and controlling territory and creating the physical sanctuaries and safe havens that are the movement's lifeblood; and
- Third, declaring "emirates" in liberated lands that are judged to be safe from US and Western intervention because of the latter's collective enfeeblement.

The viability of this strategy has been commented upon by Mary Habeck, formerly of the US National Security Staff, who argues, "No Al-Qaeda affiliate or partner (including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda in Iraq or al-Shabab) has been deposed from power by an uprising of the local population alone. They have needed outside intervention in order to expel the insurgents, even when the people have hated Al-Qaeda's often brutal rule".[10] It took the US and allied invasion of Afghanistan to destroy Al-Qaeda and depose its Taliban clients; the US-backed Sunni uprising to defeat Al-Qaeda in western Iraq in 2007 and 2008; and, the French military's 2013 intervention in Mali to unseat Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) attempt to impose its reign over that African country.

Their ability to move freely across the European Union or perhaps even to travel to the US without suspicion, also presents new security concerns and challenges.

Despite Al-Qaeda's current focus on these local and regional conflicts, the movement has not lost any desire to target the US and the West. The intention to attack further afield remains undiminished—albeit temporarily put on hold until these situations either evolve or resolve themselves. AQAP's efforts and intentions in this regard are unrelenting. But, as a result of the upheaval in North Africa and the Levant in particular, it is possible that other affiliates may use these bases as potential launching pads for attacks in Europe and even the US. The proliferation of some 8,000 foreign fighters in Syria, including US, Canadian, British, French, Belgian, German and Swedish nationals or permanent residents from those countries raises the prospect of them returning to their home or adopted countries to establish the infrastructure needed for them to

participate in future terrorist attacks. Their ability to move freely across the European Union or perhaps even to travel to the US without suspicion, also presents new security concerns and challenges.

Syria thus figures prominently in Al-Qaeda's strategy to victory. This trajectory entails the following stages:

- The *Awakening Stage* (2000-2003), which coincided with the 11 September 2001 attacks, and is described in Al-Qaeda propaganda as "Reawakening the nation by dealing a powerful blow to the head of the snake in the US";
- The *Eye-Opening Stage* (2003-2006), which unfolded after the US invasion of Iraq and was allegedly designed to perpetually engage and enervate the US and the West in a series of prolonged overseas ventures;
- The *Rising Up and Standing on the Feet Stage* (2007-2010) involved Al-Qaeda's proactive expansion to new venues of operations, as we have seen in West Africa and the Levant;
- The *Recovery Stage* (2010-2013), which continued after bin Laden's killing and sought to exploit the new opportunities created by the Arab Spring to topple apostate regimes, especially in Syria; and
- Finally, the *Declaration of the Caliphate Stage* (2013-2016) is when in the next couple of years Al-Qaeda will achieve its ultimate goal of establishing trans- or supranational Islamic rule over large swaths of territory in the Muslim world.

In sum, the longer the civil war in Syria, the greater the potential for Al-Qaeda to strengthen its training camps and operational bases in the country's southeast and north. The proliferation of the large parts of Syrian and now Iraqi territory controlled by Al-Qaeda affiliates coupled with the ungoverned or poorly governed areas of North and West Africa and the Sinai, among other places where the movement has also been active, provides Al-Qaeda movement with the capability to launch attacks locally, regionally and internationally as well.

The Impact of Syria's Refugees on Turkey

The number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, estimated to be between one and 1.5 million, may seem small when compared with Turkey's overall population of 75 million, but they already constitute significant shares of the ethnically mixed southern Turkish provinces composed of Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Sunnis and Alawites. The five provinces concerned—Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Sanliurfa and Mardin—represent 7.9% of the country's population and produce about 4.5% of its economic output. Gaziantep is Turkey's sixth largest city. Thus, the provinces are neither central nor marginal in the broader Turkish context.

Alawites and Alevis

Refugees are altering the ethnic and sectarian balance in these five provinces. For instance, Arabs, who used to represent less than 1% of the population in Kilis, comprised 53% in 2013 and perhaps even as much as 70% if estimates of unregistered refugees are taken into account. And whereas Alawites dominated the Arab community of the Hatay province before the war, constituting around a third of the province's overall population, the influx of Sunni-Arab Syrian refugees is shifting the balance, possibly stoking tensions between Sunnis and Alawites in that province, as well as between Alawites and the government in Ankara.

Since the May 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, Hatay Alawites have held rallies criticising the AKP government's socially conservative and authoritarian policies. However, growing Alawite frustration largely centres on the AKP's anti-Assad policy because it is seen as posing a threat to the Alawite community in Syria. Further fuelling tensions is the sense of disenfranchisement under the AKP, which has no Alawite cadre.

The 30 March 2014 local election results underscored Alawite mobilisation and potential radicalisation against the AKP. Traditionally, the secular-minded Alawite community has tended to vote for social democratic and centre-left parties, including the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). However, on 30 March, far-leftists made new inroads in Alawite-majority Hatay districts, signalling a political shift among the province's disaffected Alawite community. In the Samandag district, for example, the Maoist Workers' Party (IP) received 13.6% of the vote, in stark contrast to the 0.25% support the party received nationwide. In Defne, another Alawite-majority district, the Turkish Communist Party (TKP) received 5.7%, against just 0.11% support nationally, and the IP received 4.5% of ballots cast. Despite these tilts,

most Hatay Alawites remained strongly aligned with the CHP, which received 36% support in the province, while far-leftist parties received 2.7% support. More striking still, the CHP received 72% of the vote in Samandag and 82% in Defne—a record for the party in any Turkish district.

Alawites in Turkey acknowledge the need to remove al-Assad from power but worry about how the regime's collapse will affect their safety. There is a general fear that Sunni militants returning home to Turkey from Syria will turn against them. Ankara has already taken some measures to prevent the possibility of sectarian attacks, such as relocating some Sunni Arab refugees into camps in central Turkey, away from the Sunni-Alawite-mixed Hatay province. Yet the problem bears monitoring because al-Assad's fall could alter the nature and scope of the problem.

The position of Turkish (and Kurdish) Alevis, who constitute about 15% of the country's population, could further complicate matters. Despite semantically similar names—both terms are derived from Ali Ibn Abu Talib, son-in-law of the Muslim prophet Mohammed—Alevis and Alawites represent different strains of Islam. Furthermore, Alawites are Arabs and Alevis are Turks. Even Alevi populations among the Kurds and Balkan Muslims pray in Turkish, testifying to the essentially Turkish nature of Alevism.

Alawites are a part of a syncretic and highly secretive offshoot of Islam, thought to be open only to men and, in this case, an initiated few. The esoteric Alawite faith is considered by some to be close to Shiism. The Alawite identity has recently evolved. Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran reached out to the Alawites, disseminating propaganda suggesting that they are really Shia, in the hopes of justifying Shia Iranian support for the Alawite-backed regime in Damascus.

The Alevi on the other hand are neither Sunni nor Shia. The Alevi faith is a relatively unstructured interpretation of Islam, open to both genders and, historically, even to non-Muslims. Alevism is unique among Muslim sects, as it does not segregate men and women, even during prayers. The Alevi faith is also syncretic in nature, mixing Islam and Sufism, and is respectful of some traditions of Christianity and the Turks' pre-Islamic religion, Shamanism. Unlike the Alawite faith, Alevism lacks written traditions and does not emphasise religious practise.

Despite these differences, Alevis and Alawites share a visceral suspicion of the AKP's Sunni tilt. Both have taken an active part in the protests against the AKP government that began in Gezi Park in late May 2013,

quickly spread to seventy-nine cities and involved some 2.5 million mostly secular Turks. Although the Syria issue was not central in these rallies, they continued in predominantly Alevi and Alawite neighborhoods in Turkish cities, including Dikmen in Ankara and Antakya, the centre of Hatay province. Of the six demonstrators killed by the police since the beginning of the Gezi Park rallies, four were Alawites and the other two were Alevis, underscoring the fact that both groups have been at the forefront of the anti-AKP rallies since 2013.

As mentioned, the Alevi community's concerns stem not only from the AKP's Syria policy—which is seen as largely pro-Sunni—but also from the AKP's social conservatism and their political exclusion from the centres of power. The Alevis are simply not represented in the upper echelons of the AKP, which has ruled Turkey longer than any other democratically elected party since the country first became a multiparty democracy in 1950. Hence, the Alevis (and the Alawites) have been almost entirely excluded from power for the last 12 years, except in a few cities where the local government belongs to opposition parties like the CHP.

A historical memory of discrimination and persecution under the Ottoman Empire in combination with the current marginalisation has shaped the political response of the Alevi and Alawite communities: active opposition to the AKP through street politics and demonstrations, as well as a relative swing to the far-left at the ballot box which could continue should the situation in Syria deteriorate further.

This phenomenon is most clearly visible in Tunceli, Turkey's only Alevi-majority province and also a Kurdish-majority province. Tunceli has been an outlier in Turkish politics, and even in Alevi politics, where leftist and far-leftist parties have traditionally won by a wide majority. On 30 March 2014, far-leftist parties further expanded their base. Collectively, the IP, the Euro-communist TKP, the Socialist Freedom and Solidarity Party (ODP), the Communist People's Liberation Party (HKP) and the Marxist-Leninist Labour Party (EMEP) received 10.43% of the vote in Tunceli, compared with a tiny 0.48% support across the country. More specifically, the ODP received 32% of the vote in Tunceli's Mazgirt district, where it trailed the winning pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) by only 3.76%, nearly capturing the mayor's seat. In the Nazimiye district, the TKP won 13.69% of the vote. More significantly, in Ovacik it received 36%, taking the mayor's seat and marking the first time the communists have won elected office in Turkey.

Economic impact

Syrian refugees are straining the economy in southern Turkey by pushing up the cost of living, including rent and food prices. This is especially the case in Kilis, which has also suffered from the 2012 decision by Damascus to close the border to imports from Turkey. However, other provinces, including Gaziantep—nicknamed "Turkish Guangzhou" for its export zeal have found alternative markets in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, fully offsetting the loss of business with Syria.

Security challenges and the Kurds

Despite the successes of Turkish industrialists in mitigating the economic impact of the Syrian war, the refugee issue poses other challenges to Turkey, including in the security realm. To begin with, the flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey could expose ethnically mixed Arab-Kurdish areas of southern Turkey to the Syrian crisis. Currently, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian franchise of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and a group listed on the US State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO) list, and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group also on the FTO list, are fighting for control in northern Syria. Ankara, which has thrown its support behind various elements of the Syrian opposition, needs to monitor the simmering tension between Kurds and Arabs in its own mixed Kurdish-Arab provinces, such as Sanliurfa and Mardin, lest the violent confrontation in northern Syria spill over into Turkey.

In addition, Turkey is increasingly becoming a staging ground for the facilitation and smuggling of foreign nationals, including jihadists, into northern Syria to fight the al-Assad regime. This is not because Ankara supports the jihadist cause. Rather, Turkey is calculating that al-Assad will fall and the "good guys" will take power. Ankara therefore sees jihadists as a tool to precipitate the demise of the al-Assad regime.

But what if al-Assad's regime does not fall or Syria is not taken over by forces acceptable to Ankara? Following the US-Russia-brokered chemical weapons deal of 14 September 2013, this eventuality has become ever more likely, increasing the chances of a protracted civil war. Until recently, Turkey's government does not seem to have considered the more likely scenario, one in which Syria slowly collapses into a weak and divided state split between al-Assad and his opponents, including Jabhat al-Nusra.

Should this occur, Turkey would face a jihadist threat on its doorstep, across a 511-mile border that stretches along mostly flat terrain. Ankara has provided the Syrian rebels with a safe haven on its territory, a policy that has already rendered the physically unchallenging border essentially moot: in most places, one can simply drive across the border without encountering any obstacles.

Ankara could eventually have to contend with a weak or non-existent central government authority in much of the Syrian territory across the Turkish border. To prepare for this possibility, Turkey might opt for a Kurdish-run *cordon sanitaire* in northern Syria, building good ties with the Kurds in northern Syria and then using it as a buffer to protect the country against instability in the rest of Syria. It followed a similar strategy to successfully isolate itself from the conflict in Iraq, developing a good relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq in the latter part of the last decade. The fact that Ankara has chosen to improve ties with the Syrian PYD points in that direction. In July 2012, the PYD announced that it would not attack Turkey, and PYD leader Salih Muslim has visited Ankara at least twice, holding talks with Turkish officials. If the peace process between Turkey's own Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Ankara government holds, the Syrian war could end up turning Turkey and the Syrian Kurds into good friends.

Impact of the Syrian Conflict on Lebanon and Jordan

The Syrian conflict has already had an extensive, direct impact on the economy, politics and security of both Lebanon and Jordan. The degree of cohesion and effectiveness of state institutions in each country, along with the precise nature of its societal cleavages, have determined the level of vulnerability to the crisis and the ways in which local authorities have responded to it. Their crisis management, backed by considerable assistance from the principal Friends of Syria countries, has enabled them to contain a direct spill-over, but this is under strain. In the longer term, unless a mutually agreed diplomatic solution is reached in Syria, which is highly unlikely, the presence of large numbers of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries may also threaten their security and political stability.

Direct impact

The Syrian conflict has inflicted major economic losses on Lebanon and Jordan. Prior to 2011, approximately two million tonnes annually of imports transited via Lebanon to Syria, while some 30% of Turkish trade to the Gulf passed overland through Syria and then Jordan. The banking sector in both countries, which had a growing commercial presence in Syria and played an important role in providing credit and underwriting Syrian businesses, has lost an important market due to the sanctions regime. Lebanon's tourist sector has also been drastically affected, especially since Gulf countries banned their nationals from travelling there, and both economies have experienced a drop in non-real estate investment.

Besides slowing economic growth rates, the crisis has reduced public revenue, whether from customs and transit fees or from direct taxation. Conversely, the need to provide basic services for a massive number of refugees—approaching 25% of Lebanon's population and 20% of Jordan's—has increased the burden on public finances. Humanitarian and budgetary assistance from the Friends of Syria—channelled mainly through UN agencies—falls considerably short of covering the full costs. The Lebanese state's reputation for inefficiency and mismanagement, moreover, makes donors reluctant to provide direct budgetary assistance, adding to its financial problems.

Politically, the Syrian conflict has sharply polarised public opinion in Lebanon and Jordan between supporters of the al-Assad regime and of the opposition. This largely follows existing fault lines: sectarian in Lebanon, and ethno-national in Jordan. But in both cases class and regional or rural-urban divisions are also important factors shaping perceptions and mobilisation. This has had contradictory effects. On one hand, militancy occurs mainly in marginalised social sectors or the "under-class;" although in Lebanon the level of alienation among Sunni Muslims of all classes has reached worrying levels. On the other hand, the memory of their own civil wars discourages a majority of Lebanese and Jordanians from being drawn into open confrontation, whatever their political views on Syria.

The security threat to Lebanon and Jordan largely reflects these political and social cleavages. Sunni-Shia sectarianism and jihadism have been on the rise since the US invasion of Iraq, compounded by the Gulf—especially Saudi—policy of seeking to counter Iran's influence by emphasising Sunni-Shia rivalry, funding and arming Sunni militant groups, and mosque building. The Syrian conflict has intensified these trends. At the same time, Hizballah's extensive involvement in the Syrian conflict has deepened the antipathy of other Lebanese communities towards it, and encourages them to revive demands to disarm it. Moreover, militant Salafist groups have responded by bombing Hizballah targets and Shia civilians. A similar threat has not yet emerged in Jordan, but the authorities fear that jihadists returning from Syria will resume the sort of suicide attacks that were conducted against Jordanian targets by Zarqawi's network in 2005.

(...) societal cleavages are a major source of the vulnerability of Lebanon and Jordan to the fall-out of the Syrian conflict. (...) despite the dominant narratives of "primordial" divisions (...) more important are class and regional differences.

Vulnerabilities

Clearly, societal cleavages are a major source of the vulnerability of Lebanon and Jordan to the fall-out of the Syrian conflict. But despite the dominant narratives of "primordial" divisions—sectarian (Sunni-Shia) or ethno-national (Palestinian-Jordanian)—more important are class and regional differences that determine the form and direction of mobilisation.

For example, most Lebanese who join Syrian rebel groups—overwhelmingly Salafist ones—come from deprived inner-city

Sunni Muslim neighbourhoods or villages in peripheral or severely neglected border areas. In Jordan they come from the lower-income urban sprawl of Amman-Zarqa that is home to many Palestinian refugees, rather than from the border villages inhabited by East Bankers with family ties to southern Syria. In both countries some of these networks have espoused Al-Qaeda or share its ideology and have mounted suicide attacks against local targets at various times since 2000 (Lebanon) or 2005 (Jordan). In Lebanon, they have been increasingly ready to confront the Lebanese Armed Forces in Sidon and Tripoli since 2013, which previously waged a four-month battle against the Salafist Fateh-Islam in 2007.

These patterns reflect long-standing socio-economic disparities, which have become more marked over the past two decades. As in other Arab countries, the ways in which economic liberalisation and privatisation policies have been implemented has widened the income divide, eroded public services and social safety nets in inequitable ways, and exacerbated grievances. The pace of reform—whether political, legislative, or administrative—has not kept up with the need for greater economic access and opportunity. So rather than being a limited political challenge posed by a narrow social constituency, mobilisation around the Syrian conflict reveal a wider crisis of governance, political legitimacy, and constitutional order in Lebanon and Jordan.

The competence and cohesion of state institutions and the level of public trust in them differs widely between Lebanon and Jordan. But dissatisfaction with the status quo is evident in both, eroding the legitimacy of constitutional authorities. In Lebanon, this has left the armed forces as virtually the only national institution around which there is broad support. But this burdens it with political responsibility for which it is not suited and is driving a rift between it and the Sunni community, which increasingly views it as unduly influenced by Hizballah. This is mirrored by the perception of the Internal Security Forces as a stronghold of the rival Future Movement led by the Hariri family, further illustrating that the cohesion and legitimacy of key state institutions and service providers are at risk.

It is in this respect that Jordan has a clear advantage. Its administration, security sector (including the armed forces) and judiciary are generally regarded as competent and professional. However, the visible reluctance of King Abdullah to engage in credible political reform and continuing resistance of the old guard that dominates government and parliament is eroding public faith in the political system. This comes against a backdrop of a growing resort to violence to resolve social disputes, coupled with

the strengthening of clan identity, which brings the effectiveness of state institutions such as the police and judiciary into question. Furthermore, although the protest movement that emerged in 2010-11 has almost completely dissipated, the fact that it originates almost entirely from East Bank youth and sectors such as military retirees, shows the depth of social alienation and distrust among the monarchy's key social constituencies.

Syrian refugees: the challenge in the long-term

Political actors and social forces in Lebanon and Jordan tend to divide along relatively simple lines on the Syrian conflict—pro- or anti- regime and opposition—but may align very differently when it comes to a wide array of other domestic issues—from electoral or administrative reform to social and economic policies. So far the Syrian conflict has generally served to dampen or deflect pressures for reform or protests, but the impact of the influx of massive numbers of Syrian refugees is prompting new alignments and responses to the deepening socio-economic crisis.

Most obvious, although still scattered and diffuse, is the growth of hostility towards the refugees among significant numbers of Lebanese and Jordanians. This cuts across communal lines, as people who may sympathise broadly with the Syrian opposition or Syrians in general also increasingly resent the refugees. This is often reported in poverty-stricken areas or communities that already suffer from poor public services and high unemployment; it is also related to competition for low-skill jobs by Syrians who are willing to accept low pay, as well as the sharp rise in rents due to the enormous jump in demand. Syrians have always occupied a place in the labour market in both countries and contributed to the economy. International assistance for the refugees and rents also feed local incomes substantially. The Syrian refugees become in part a scapegoat for local grievances; they are resented because they receive targeted aid that equally poor local communities lack.

The Lebanese and Jordanian authorities (and international governmental donors and NGOs) tend to focus on the immediate and medium-term issues of humanitarian aid and cost. But more attention needs to be paid to the other implications of a long-term presence of large refugee populations. Their number will probably decrease only slowly even if the Syrian conflict ends in a formal peace deal. In the absence of a negotiated agreement, it is likely that the refugees will mobilise politically and militarily, polarising host countries and generating serious security challenges. Penetration by a wide range of intelligence agencies—Syrian, local and other—is extremely likely and will compound the challenges by

adding a cross-border, regional dimension. As in Palestine between the first and second *intifadas*, today's Syrian refugee children may lead the next Syrian rebellion.

Conclusion

The relative success of the al-Assad regime and decline of the opposition and armed rebellion are currently easing tensions in Lebanon, but a new wave of socio-economic protests encompassing the entire public sector is gathering new momentum. In Jordan, the scale of destruction in Syria, rise of takfiri-jihadism, and adverse impact of the influx of refugees have dampened the grassroots protest movement, but the unwillingness of the monarch and old guard establishment to introduce convincing reforms is undermining faith in the system even in loyalist constituencies. Lebanon is more fragile and vulnerable than Jordan, but both are under growing political strain. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has reinforced political paralysis in both countries, but by the same token external actors can help by encouraging political reconciliation and consensus and by increasing financial assistance for socio-economic development.

The Legacies of Unresolved Problems in Iraq: Sunni Insurgency, Kurdish Separatism and the Politics of Elite Accommodation

Editor's note: This paper was produced in early May 2014, prior to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) concerted push into Iraqi territory one month later. It therefore does not address this particular development in Iraq's security.

As Iraq enters its second decade of being free from the strictures of the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein, the situation remains one of serious concern whether in the spheres of security of the country and its peoples, stability of its political processes and institutions or even the very integrity of the country within its present territorial parameters. The eyes of the international community are now firmly focused on the rapidly unravelling socio-political fabric of Iraq, with serious questions being asked as to where the trends that are apparent today will lead tomorrow.

While there is a range of issues that are stalking Iraq at this moment in time, three stand out as being of particular salience. In terms of how they are most often reported, the most important of these issues would seem to be the upsurge in violence across Iraq, and most notably in those areas in which Sunni Arabs predominate—in the areas north and west of Baghdad, in the governorates of Anbar, Ninevah, Salahadin, and Diyala. The levels of violence, largely associated with the activities of the jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have become very significant, as has the ability of ISIL to not only inflict damage and losses upon the institutions of the government of Iraq and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), but to also seize, control, and consolidate their hold on key towns and territories—and most notably the infamous town of Fallujah.

The second issue that attracts considerable attention at this time is the dispute between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that administers the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KR-I) and the government of Iraq itself. These two poles of political power, residing in Erbil and Baghdad respectively, represent not only two different regions that exist somewhat awkwardly alongside each other within the territorial boundaries of Iraq; they also represent two different political visions of a federal Iraq vs. a centralised Iraq; they advance two different economic models for the exploitation of oil and gas reserves; they contest disputed territories that lie in a strategically important swathe of

land that lies north of Baghdad and to the south of KRG-controlled territory; and they project contending notions of sovereignty, with each notion posing a threat to the narrative pursued by the other.

The third issue to address has tended to attract less attention than the rise of ISIL or the machinations of the Kurds, but is perhaps the biggest of the political games that is currently being played on this crowded set. The future of incumbent prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has emerged as an issue of great weight in determining Iraq's future political orientation. For al-Maliki, issues relating to the threat posed by ISIL or the autonomous sovereign aspirations of the Kurds arguably pale into insignificance compared to the challenge of ensuring his continued occupation of the Prime Minister's Office. While ISIL and Sunni Arab politicians, and the Kurds, present certain sorts of challenges, they rarely are able to pose such a threat that could remove him from his position. Only those closer to him, from either his own party, coalition or other Shia parties could have the leverage to do this through elections or internal reordering. It is the issues that emanate from this internal Shia theatre that probably weigh heaviest on the mind of the prime minister.

This paper considers the three key themes of (i) the deteriorating security situation and the swell of sectarian-associated violence; (ii) the dangerously unstable situation that has emerged between the KRG and the government of Iraq, with particular reference to the KRG's attempts to develop an independent oil and gas sector as part of a wider engagement with Turkey, and; (iii) the survival of Nouri al-Maliki and the future cohesiveness of Shia political actors in a country that will be in flux for some time following the elections of April 2014.

(...) al-Maliki's difficult relationship with the Kurds, and the inability of both sets of political elites to resolve the contestation over the status of the disputed territories that lie between Baghdad and Erbil have provided a zone of weakened sovereignty in which insurgent groups, and especially ISIL, have flourished.

Together, these issues constitute a set opportunities that allow for the further destabilisation of Iraq. Working backwards through them, the policies of Prime Minister al-Maliki have been characterised as distinctly sectarian, generating a sense of marginalisation and subjugation among other communities, and especially the Sunni Arabs, that then gives fertile ground for terrorist and insurgent groups to recruit and operate. Similarly, al-Maliki's difficult relationship with the Kurds, and the inability of both sets of political elites to resolve the

contestation over the status of the disputed territories that lie between Baghdad and Erbil have provided a zone of weakened sovereignty in which insurgent groups, and especially ISIL, have flourished. Lastly, ISIL itself has proven to be a highly capable and durable organisation that has not only learned the lessons of its defeated predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq/Al-Qaeda Iraq (ISI/AQI), but the "good practise" of US-led counter-insurgency efforts of 2007-08. Far from being covert and secretive operators, ISIL now behaves like a regular military force, seeking the occupation and administration of territory, and the winning over of disenchanted locals to its cause.

Destabilised Iraq

The deterioration of the security situation in Iraq has been ongoing arguably since the end of the civil war in 2008 and has increased in momentum over the months and years. In short, the civil war of 2006-08 ended in Iraq because of a combination of factors that no longer exist in the country today. These factors included an overwhelming US presence and the willingness of US commanders to utilise significant force against those Sunni insurgents (whether Iraqi Islamist, Al-Qaeda jihadist or Iraqi nationalist) that were deemed 'irreconcilable'; the strategy of splitting Iraqi insurgents away from the Al-Qaeda associated jihadists, and then bringing them into a series of local security arrangements known as the Sons of Iraq or the Awakening, and using these new forces against the Al-Qaeda presence; the seeming willingness of the al-Maliki government to accept the US strategy for working with Sunni militias, and the plan to integrate them into the security offices of the state in a post-US setting; and the fact that the Sunni Arab community, having failed to achieve any foothold in the Iraqi state by election boycott, insurgency and election participation, being traumatised and exhausted, are now unwilling to accept compromise solutions going forward.

The Kurds in Iraq: masters of destiny, or destined to be mastered?

In many ways, Iraq is now a divided country—formally so—between the largely Arab-dominated areas governed on the whole from Baghdad by the institutions of the government of Iraq, and the largely Kurdish-dominated areas governed, with the significant exception of those areas in the disputed territories south of KRG control, from the increasingly vibrant regional capital of Erbil. By May 2014, a tense situation between Erbil and Baghdad, caused by a range of disputes, had become a perennial feature of the political life of Iraq. These disputes relate to two particular issues: the exportation of oil and gas (and the increased

sensitivity around this issue caused by a bilateral agreement reached between the KRG and the government of Turkey in November 2013); and the government of Iraq's budgetary allocation to the KRG. The two issues are interconnected, with Baghdad's limiting of the KRG budget serving as a heavily threateningly response to Erbil's oil and gas policies, and Erbil moving ahead with its policies in order to ensure that Baghdad does not control Kurdistan financially. The two issues are also part of a larger dispute, symbolic in nature, though no less destabilising than the reality of revenues and finance, and that is the levels of sovereignty exercised by the KRG over its own affairs, and the rights and competences of the government of Iraq in a federal system.

Elections, sectarianism and elite accommodation

National elections took place in Iraq on 30 April 2014, amid heightened security concerns due to the ramping up of ISIL-related activities and the failure of the Iraqi Security Forces to secure significant areas in Anbar, Diyala and Salahadin provinces. The elections occurred at a time of both great fragmentation in Iraqi political life and, conversely, unity. The fragmentation element focused around the obvious sectarianisation and ethnicisation of the Iraqi political community, into the three groupings of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds. In addition, these communities were also heavily fractured, with internal divisions within them being very significant. Yet there was a sense of unity, too, in terms of their being a commonly-held view among virtually all political parties against the continued incumbency of Prime Minister al-Maliki.

The scene therefore remains set for a confrontation between al-Maliki and his opponents, and for a further division of Iraq's governmental offices by a process of elite accommodation. There is scant evidence to suggest that the outcome of these processes will be a future Iraq that is more integrated, cohesive and secure. Rather, the trajectories that seem to be emerging suggest further autonomy for the Kurds, stronger local control by Sunnis in the governorates north and west of Baghdad, and heightened intra-factional contestation among Shia groups. In this scenario, the opportunities for the enhancement of groups such as ISIL and for the spreading of the instability of Syria further into Iraq remain a particularly worrying reality and one with which Western powers need to consider as a development that may prove more durable than ephemeral.

US Power and Strategy

The United States is in a period of retrenchment and reorientation in its policies towards the Middle East which might be described as "right sizing" its commitments and ambitions. The Obama administration has repeatedly demonstrated its determination to avoid costly new military commitments and to attempt to resolve long-standing challenges through diplomatic means. This right-sizing is a response to the recognition of the failures of military intervention in Iraq, the real limitations imposed by the global financial crisis, and the preferences of an exhausted American public. This does not mean the abandonment of the region or the dismantling of its security architecture. Nor are there any serious great power rivals bidding to replace the US as it retrenches, with China remaining largely aloof and Russian adventurism masking its real weakness. The US restraint has nonetheless been profoundly disorienting to regional allies, and may prove unsustainable in the face of ongoing regional turmoil.

The Obama administration's right-sizing strategy has been plain to see and fairly clearly articulated. The withdrawal of more than 100,000 troops from Iraq and the winding down of the US military commitment in Afghanistan are the most obvious manifestations. The shift away from the ambitions of the Bush administration's Global War on Terror is another, as is the more cautious approach towards democracy promotion and regional engagement. This administration recognises the limits of US power, particularly in terms of the ability to reshape or control the internal affairs of states in the region, and has adapted its objectives accordingly. The administration has of course continued to pursue its core interests through less direct means, such as relying more upon drone strikes and collaboration with local partners for counter-terrorism. It has maintained or expanded its military base structure in the Gulf, and shows few signs of returning to the dramatically lower level of military presence of the pre-1990 era. It has also escalated its diplomatic engagement in the region, with extraordinarily ambitious efforts to negotiate a resolution to the Iranian nuclear challenge, the Syrian civil war, and (less optimistically) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Arab uprisings posed a profound challenge to US strategy in the region. The Obama administration clearly sympathised with the democratic protestors in the early days of the uprisings. Obama's May 2011 speech at the State Department, which remains one of his only major statements of US policy towards the regional changes, aligned the US with the aspirations of the protest movements and described change

as inevitable. Obama also repeatedly emphasised that these movements were not about the United States and sought to promote Arabs as the critical actors. Its case-by-case approach often appeared inconsistent and confusing, however, with its acceptance of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-backed crushing of the Bahraini uprising, a particularly glaring hole in its record. Its limited military intervention in Libya could have helped establish a broader regional norm against bloody repression, but those ambitions faded in Syria's killing fields and Libya's post-Qaddafi chaos.

The paradoxical effect of the Arab uprisings has been a steep downgrading in US efforts to promote democracy or engage with Arab publics which is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. In Egypt, the US moved remarkably quickly to push former President Hosni Mubarak to step down, tried hard to push for a democratic transition, and proved more willing than at any time in memory to accept an Islamist victory at the polls. The 3 July 2013 military coup, accompanied by a massive surge of anti-US sentiment, offered a harsh verdict on this attempt to align policy with values. The near-complete restoration of Egypt's old regime will likely be met with grudging acceptance in Washington, even if few expect it to lead to stability and many worry about the radicalising effects of its sweeping repression. Washington feels badly burned by the popular venom against its policies in Egypt and by the collapse of the democratic transition it attempted to shepherd. The Washington policy community remains rather more committed to Egyptian human rights and democracy than most Egyptians, but the US government seems prepared to fall back on core strategic relations. There are very few opportunities today anywhere in the region for conventional democracy promotion initiatives, and far more scepticism about the possibility or even desirability of successful change.

The most powerful demonstration of the new US restraint has been the administration's refusal to intervene directly in Syria despite considerable pressure from regional allies and domestic elites. Indeed, Obama's ability to avoid an intervention in Syria has been one of the more surprising and in many ways impressive foreign policy decisions in recent decades. Obama clearly (and in my view correctly) views even a limited intervention in Syria as the first step on an extremely slippery slope towards another Iraq-style fiasco, and has brushed aside an array of proposals to get more deeply involved. It is not clear how much of this is unique to Obama and how much is dictated by the realities of US overextension and retrenchment. While public opinion strongly supports this hands-off stance, and few analysts really believe that limited intervention would work, it seems highly likely that any other likely occupant of the White House (McCain, Romney or Hillary Clinton) would

have been more deeply involved in Syria by now. The human horrors of Syria, the destabilising effects on neighbours and the escalating threat of jihadist fighters will continue to challenge the administration's ability to maintain distance.

The rapidly changing terms of Islamist politics and jihadist organisation do pose a significant challenge to the administration's policies. Since the killing of Osama bin Laden and degradation of the Al-Qaeda core, jihadist movements have adapted in troubling ways. Groups such as Yemen's Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the various Ansar al-Sharia organisations have taken root, governing territory and providing services in ways long considered beyond the reach of jihadist movements. Egypt's military coup and the regional campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, which badly discredited mainstream Islamist ideas of democratic participation and degraded the coherence of their organisation, are creating new candidates for radicalisation. For the US, the coup struck a death blow to the strategy of including mainstream Islamists within democratic politics to create a bulwark against more radical groups. And Syria, of course, has emerged as the most vital arena for global jihad since Iraq in the 2000s, attracting vast numbers of foreign fighters, funding, and political support. It is not clear that the US can respond to these rapidly evolving challenges with drone strikes, local partners, and defensive counter-terrorism mechanisms.

The nuclear negotiations with Iran seem at this point to have greater prospects for success than do either of the other two major diplomatic processes. The Geneva talks on Syria remain an essential framework for the political solution which ultimately will be required, but there may well be years of civil war before the parties are ready to make such a deal. The now-suspended Israeli-Palestinian talks seemed doomed from the start, with neither party especially interested and no viable deal apparent. Iran's talks continue to be productive and hold out the tantalising prospect of transforming that long-standing strategic relationship. A nuclear deal might remain only that, of course, an important step which remains confined to that single file. But it could also open the door to a broader rapprochement, a change which some hope might lead to new opportunities to stabilise Iraq and Syria, defuse the spiralling sectarianism blighting the region, and even facilitate Israeli-

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Palestinian progress. Indeed, it is precisely the possibilities of regional realignment and a broader rapprochement with Iran which intrigue many in Washington while frightening and enraging Tel Aviv and Riyadh. The prospect of such a deal has proven deeply alarming to Israel and Saudi Arabia, each of which views the nuclear issue as only one component of a broader strategic challenge.

It is quite remarkable that the same Arab states and elites which complained so bitterly over the intervention in Iraq now complain about non-intervention in Syria.

The discontent of US regional allies has been one of the more striking features of the past few years. The regional architecture had in many ways become hard-wired for the more aggressive and hawkish policies of the Bush administration. Arab and Israeli leaders might have complained about US policies, but they had become accustomed to a distinct US strategy of confronting Iran, prioritising counter-terrorism and neglecting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These expectations shaped the baseline for their response to US policies during the Arab Spring. Gulf and Israeli leaders were baffled and furious over US policy towards Egypt, diplomacy with Iran, and non-intervention in Syria. It is quite remarkable that the same Arab states and elites which complained so bitterly over the intervention in Iraq now complain about non-intervention in Syria. It is even more remarkable the extent to which US allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, have openly worked against key US interests and policies in areas ranging from Egypt (where Riyadh supported the military coup) to Syria (arming the opposition and pushing for aggressive action). These intra-alliance problems are likely to prove limited in their overall scope, however, as the GCC states have no other real security options and continue to receive major US military support. One unstated goal might be to implant new expectations and habits of behaviour, as consistent restraint leads regional states to adopt more realistic expectations about Washington's intentions and capabilities.

"Right-sizing" indeed better describes US regional strategy than retrenchment, at least for now. This strategy seems appropriate to US capabilities and interests, and is broadly in line with US public opinion. No better alternative has been articulated, and it seems likely that the Obama administration will continue to work to limit America's exposure to regional turbulence while pushing to resolve the Iranian nuclear stand-off, the one core issue where the timing seems aligned to make real advances. The real question is whether this strategy of

right-sizing can survive the continuing crisis in Syria, evolving jihadism, the possible failure of diplomacy with Iran, the turbulent course of the Arab transitions and the election of a new US president in 2016.

Russian Objectives in the Middle East

Russia's policy in the Middle East is not primarily about the Middle East. It derives from more fundamental interests of a global, Eurasian and internal character and for this reason, its policy often appears opportunistic to countries in the region and other external players. Nevertheless, Russia's interests are pursued consistently and toughly, and they will not be lightly compromised or deflected. These derivative, yet tenacious objectives are to prevent Western-sponsored regime change, foreclose military options against Iran, constrain (and yet influence) Israel, secure energy supply dominance in Europe and Eurasia and disrupt the (perceived) linkage between Washington, Sunni Wahhabist regimes and Islamists in Russia itself. (In contrast to these invariant objectives, Russia's undoubted interest in arms sales is contingent rather than primary). Moscow seeks infuence not only for these specific (and plausibly defensive) reasons, but as an end in itself. The outcomes of conflict and crisis in Syria and Ukraine respectively will have a pronounced impact on Russia's regional influence and standing.

Under Vladimir Putin's stewardship the Russian Federation has emerged as an emphatically modern state, fearful but also contemptuous of post-modernism and the elevation of universal values over the absolutes of nation and state. Outside its presumptive "sphere of privileged interests" in the former USSR, it is rigorously Westphalian in upholding state sovereignty and a strict demarcation between internal and external affairs. At a principled level, it seeks to legitimise a multipolar world composed of multiple values centres. Yet it brings a Darwinian spirit and Leninist methodology to these enterprises and others. For the trustees of Russia's security, power exists to be used, weakness and division will be exploited, and hard guarantees matter more than the intangibles of trust or, in official NATO parlance, "habits of cooperation".

For the trustees of Russia's security, power exists to be used, weakness and division will be exploited, and hard guarantees matter more than the intangibles of trust or, in official NATO parlance, "habits of cooperation".

Now as in the Soviet past, national interest is understood through the prism of regime interest. If Russian foreign policy has an overarching goal, it is the creation of an international environment conducive to the maintenance of the system of governance at home. The linkage latterly drawn by Dmitry

Medvedev in February 2011 between Western-sponsored regime change in Libya and 'what they plan for us in Russia' was but the latest re-iteration of a connection established during NATO's interventions in the former Yugoslavia, a genealogy extended by the 'colour revolutions' of 2003-04. In 2011 Moscow's neuralgic fear of 'colour revolutions' in Eurasia spread to the Arab world, and today in Ukraine it is the Arab Spring that is invoked as often as the Orange Revolution of the previous decade. (Fyodor Lukyanov, Chairman of Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, November 2013: "Ukraine has briefly become a Near Eastern country for us.") On 25 January 2014, after a meeting preparing Russia's 'transition to a state of war' [*perekhoda na usloviya voennogo vremeni*], Army General Valery Gerasimov stated that the General Staff perceived a systemic connection between methods of 'armed struggle' in Syria and Ukraine.

More important than these connections is the Islamic factor in Russia itself. Today more than 20 million Russian citizens are Muslim, which in relative terms is 40-50% greater than in 1989. In June 2009, President Medvedev told an audience in Cairo:

> "Islam is an inalienable part of Russian history and culture.... *Russia does not need to seek friendship with the Muslim world.* Our country is an organic part of this world. [emphasis added]."[11]

Despite the self-congratulation, Russia's 'inalienable' Muslim attributes are a source of anxiety. The first reason is demographic. Alexei Malashenko at the Carnegie Centre in Moscow, who is no hysteric, forecasts that Russia will have a Muslim majority in 50 years' time, and this might be an underestimate. It is widely expected that Muslims will form the majority cohort in the Armed Forces by 2020. A second is the radicalisation of part of this population, a phenomenon only aggravated by social alienation and a rising tide of ethno-Russian nationalism amongst the Slavic majority. A third is the growing international connections between Russia's Muslims and Muslim states. Of the country's 8,000 mosques (up from 300 in 1991), half are funded wholly or in part from sources in Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia. For almost 15 years until the rapprochement of 2003, Moscow saw the Saudi Kingdom as the principal sponsor of Islamist radicalism in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The Syrian conflict has both ended this rapprochement and rekindled apprehension about the intentions of Muslim states in Russia's borderlands and even its interior.

Global interests in the regional context

Whilst these factors point to some continuities between Russian and Soviet policy, they are primary colours in a far more complex picture. Russia's approach towards the region is no longer bipolar or, towards the West, zero sum. Its main foe in the region is Islamist radicalism, not the West. It condemns 'Western messianism' in its own terms, but its main indictment is that whenever the West has intervened, it has made a mess and given Islamist radicals a path to power.

In the Middle East, as in other places, Moscow is open to cooperation with the West, but only on the basis of 'equality': in other words, cooperation that does not cede geopolitical advantages or grant them. In preference to defeating the West or displacing it—something it knows it does not have the power to do—Russia seeks to bind the West into its Westphalian framework, it seeks recognition as a determinate regional actor and as an indispensable partner that possesses influence, hard knowledge and wisdom. Finally, Russia has no Soviet-era complexes about 'clients'. It is determined to develop relationships with Egypt and Israel (not to say Turkey) and will not accept that it can do so only by leave of the United States. By the same token, it views US-Iran rapprochement and US acceptance of Syria's current regime as more beneficial to its interests than confrontation. In the Middle East as elsewhere, Russia seeks to reconcile the West to the fact, *pace* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, that 'it is losing its monopoly over the globalisation process'. For this reason, it believes that a 'cooperative' approach would require more adjustment by the West than by itself, and it therefore expects to encounter resistance.

Regional policy

In mid-2011 at the height of the Arab Spring, the conventional Western wisdom was that Russia was marginalising itself in the Middle East and, by putting itself on the 'wrong side of history', at risk of losing all. Three years later, Russia enjoys more influence in the region than at any time since the USSR collapsed. It would be fair to say that no single external power is taken more seriously.

The uprising against Bashar al-Assad, which many thought would be the death knell of Russian influence, has become the vehicle for its revival and the fulcrum for a regional policy that is generating resonances from the Nile to the Caspian. To a fair extent, this change of fortune can be ascribed to the exploitation of opportunity and the failings of others. But

to a greater extent, it reflects a disciplined approach to ends and means, the adroit application of limited power and a willingness to suffer any abuse and opprobrium in defence of core allies and interests. In Clausewitzian terms, Syria has emerged as the 'centre of gravity' in a struggle to push Islamists onto the defensive, cure the West of its hubris, re-legitimise Iran's participation in the region and rehabilitate *Realpolitik* as the basis of prudence and wisdom.

Commentators close to the Kremlin were recently fond of saying that Russia had no interest in keeping al-Assad in power, only in blocking externally imposed regime change. But this is less than a half-truth. Russia has opposed any form of regime change in Syria, internal or external and in 2011 even opposed the Yemen variant, whereby al-Assad would technically cede power to his vice-president.[12] However sincere the Syrian National Council might have been regarding the security of Russia's investments and its naval facility at Tartus, their assurances had no value in Moscow thanks to the Kremlin's moral certainty that not they, but the Islamists would inherit Syria after al-Assad's departure. Nevertheless, the obduracy of this stance and Russia's firm military support for the al-Assad regime aggravated the risk of Western military intervention until, as is well known, the conundrum was solved by the US-Russia agreement of 14 September 2013 on the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles.

For the United States, the agreement erased a 'red line', resolved a domestic political impasse and provided a chastening reality check. If it was not willing to intervene in Syria, then it needed Russia. For Russia, what mattered was not Syria's chemical weapons, which were purely of instrumental importance (as inadvertently conceded by Lavrov, who told the Valdai Club that it would be good if all 'or most' of them were eliminated). What mattered was the United States, which would no longer be quite the obstacle it had been to Russian objectives.

The first and most urgent of these objectives was to eliminate the threat of war hanging over Iran, a threat that even in 2011, Moscow saw as almost certain to produce war in 2012. What Moscow has helped to ensure instead is Iran's partial rehabilitation. Despite the marked change of tonality since Rouhani replaced Ahmadinejad in June 2013, it is unlikely that the Joint Plan of Action agreed between Iran and the P5 on 24 November 2013 would have been concluded in the absence of the chemical weapons agreement with Syria. The Syria accord gave Washington a stake in cooperation with Moscow. The November accord with Iran became the first tangible consequence of this cooperation. Its terms were defensible, and US Secretary of State John Kerry defended

them. But the simple fact of the agreement generated resonances that Russia could exploit to its advantage and the United States could not. First, it put a spanner in the Saudi-US relationship, which is unlikely to be removed on President Obama's watch. Second, it was a further blow to Israel's confidence in the Obama administration, which was already low and is surely not lessened by Russian statements that Israel's nuclear weapons should now come onto the table as well.

Moreover, this shift in political coordinates has made Russia's unconvivial partnership with Iran less unconvivial. President Rouhani's initial verdict about ties with Russia was, "[t]here is neither a sign of a crisis in their relations nor of any prospects".[13] Russia has never been a supporter of Iran's nuclear aspirations, but it has not opposed them very much, and it has derived financial benefit from them where it could. It had already secured what it most needs from Iran: full support of their joint ally in Syria, a *glacis* against US and NATO encroachments, a firm counterbalance to Saudi and jihadist influence in Iraq, the Gulf and Afghanistan and, not least, a policy of non-intervention in the south Caucasus and Central Asia.

But additionally, in defiance of Rouhani's verdict, Russia has now broken a 20-year logjam with Iran regarding the Caspian Sea. On 22 April 2014, Moscow announced that the Caspian Five had concluded a Convention on the Independence of the Caspian Sea. Independence means exclusion of non-regional military forces and, by implication, influence. According to Sergey Lavrov, this Caspian exclusiveness "concerns everything: security issues and setting of the requirements and standards governing the region". It also complements Russia's recent closure of the Sea of Okhotsk. But it remains to be seen whether this acceptance of a key component of Russian security architecture (as remarkable for Azerbaijan as for Iran) will meet Russia's expectations in a region whose players are relentlessly agile in parlaying the ambitions of greater powers.

From Russia's perspective, too much good news about Iran would not be good. Gazprom would not welcome Iran's return to the global gas market. Moscow apparently calculates that the limited rapprochement with the West does not present this prospect, which would provoke a full-blown crisis between

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the Western powers, their Sunni Gulf allies and Israel. What Russia seeks from the rapprochement is greater economic presence in Iran, increased influence in the West's regional policy and further changes in the region's architecture.

Like the breakthrough in Syria, the USD 2-billion arms deal concluded between Russia and Egypt's new military regime is the beneficiary of an arguable misstep by the United States. Unlike the Sunni Gulf states, whose backing for the acting presidency of Field Marshal al-Sisi was immediate and robust, the US response had been incoherent and discordant. The result is that Russia will now supply Egypt with arms (some of them advanced) financed by Saudi, Kuwaiti and UAE money. As both parties know, arms sales are usually about more than arms. They are also about the orientation of military establishments. Changing the orientation of Egypt's military establishment for the second time in 40 years is probably beyond Russia's means and possibly beyond its ambition as well. But a profitable relationship unsettling to hegemonic certainties is a good thing in itself even if its trajectory is modest. These complexities do not cause restlessness in Moscow. Nor does the contradiction of drawing closer to a Sunni regime hostile to Iran. Moscow's narrative is that it will cooperate on a pragmatic basis with any regime, Sunni or Shiite, as long as it is secular. Again, this is a half-truth, because Iran's regime is not secular even if it is now pragmatic. The full truth is that Russia will cooperate with any state of the region that does not threaten it and does not act as a surrogate for the West.

Israel is arguably an exception to the latter half of this rule, but its alignments and dependencies are no longer as axiomatic as they once were. Russia now seeks further leverage over Israel as well as deeper accord with it. The relationship is appreciably different from the Soviet-Israel relationship. Its unique inner tensions and potentials arise from an interplay between interstate and transnational factors. The transnational factor is the Russian speaking emigré presence in Israel, which now amounts to some 20% of the population (though not an insignificant number are Ukrainians). In Soviet times, this was a refugee presence, and it was anti-Soviet. Today it is highly diverse, much of it a constituency for better relations. To Kremlin ideologists, this population is part of *russkiy mir* ("Russian world")—the designation for Russia's legitimate sphere of cultural and political influence abroad. In turn, the Russian Federation's Jewish citizens are of intrinsic interest to Israel, providing the Kremlin and its allies in 'civic' organisations and the State Duma with a point of leverage that, to be sure, must be used with care (and occasionally is). The business relationship, which also includes energy, is small but problematic, given the role that the state plays in business inside Russia

and the role that intelligence professionals play in some Russian businesses abroad.

The inter-state dimension has also changed. Russia is not only de facto in alliance with Iran; it is interested in strengthening its influence in Lebanon and developing a relationship with Hizballah, which Israel regards as a terrorist organisation and Russia does not. But Russia also views Israel as an ally, putative and actual, in its conflict with jihadism. It seeks a free trade agreement (as does Israel), it has strong interest in Israel's technology, and it would like to see the US monopoly of the intelligence relationship broken. On its side, Israel's diminished confidence in Washington has stimulated it to develop a regional and global architecture of security that not only includes Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan but Russia. Although Israeli Foreign Minister Lieberman personifies the Russia tendency, the phenomenon is more widespread, but it is amply counterbalanced and this is likely to remain the case. In deference to Russian interests, Israel halted arms supplies to Georgia in 2008, and it chose not to vote in the 27 March 2014 UN General Assembly resolution on Crimea.

Implications of Crimea's annexation

At the outset of Russia's military intervention in Crimea, the view in much of the West was that Putin had embarked upon a reckless course. If this view is shared in the Middle East, it is not apparent. Crimea's annexation transformed Russia overnight into the dominant naval power in the Black Sea, unconstrained by any of the former limitations of the 1997 Russia-Ukraine basing agreement on deployment, modernisation and activity. It also became the de facto arbiter of Black Sea energy resource development. The view of Iran and of the remaining four Caspian littoral states is that Russia has become stronger. To say the least, Israel's assessment has been cautious. Apart from its de facto abstention on the Crimean issue, the government refused to receive a delegation of pro-Maidan Jews who arrived from Kyiv in February 2014. Caution about the outcome of the Ukraine crisis is advisable. But its reverberations in the Middle East could prove as serious as in Europe. Before the emergence of Ukraine, Turkey and Russia were the only Black Sea powers in contention, and that is once again the case today. The Tatar-Ottoman-Turkic relationship is a powerful one, and outrage at Russia's conduct has only begun to be felt. How it will express itself is for the moment unclear. But after a 20-year period of improvement in Russo-Turkish relations, it will be clear to Ankara that a fundamental reassessment is required. The

same is clear to Turkey's NATO allies, and it will be interesting to see whether the spirit and 'habits' of alliance return to this part of the world.

China's Balancing Act in the Gulf

The Chinese government's instinct in foreign policy is to balance between its interests, and that balancing act is becoming more treacherous in the Middle East.

Over the two decades since it became a net oil importer, China has grown increasingly reliant on energy supplies from the Gulf, a part of the world which is both prone to instability and in which Beijing has little influence. In this way, China's economic growth—and the domestic political stability that growth helps provide—is dependent on energy that China cannot secure alone. To secure that energy, China relies on the good will of the United States, a country it often perceives to be its principal potential foe. China's reliance on Middle Eastern energy therefore not only makes it vulnerable to regional upheaval, but also exacerbates potential Chinese vulnerability to US action.

China has sought to diversify its sources of oil, looking to invest especially in Africa, and it has also pursued fuels other than oil and gas, such as coal and nuclear power. But its needs are growing so rapidly, including to fuel its growing fleet of automobiles, that increasing reliance on oil and gas seems to be a certainty in the coming decades, and the Gulf is where the oil is—20% of China's oil imports come from Saudi Arabia alone.

Aspiring Chinese allies in the Gulf hope this reliance will push China to take on a new role in the region. Some seek to use a stronger China relationship to supplement strong relationships with the United States, and some seek to balance against US power. China has sought carefully to build ties with all of them.

Yet, Beijing has also sought to maintain its distance. Even as Iran, Iraq and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states all seek stronger ties with China, and many seek a greater role for China in the Middle East, China remains cautious. Wary of the Iran-GCC rivalry and keeping a watchful eye on the United States, China continues to seek to avoid becoming entangled in these regional dynamics. With growing domestic energy demands and a less certain US global role, the balance may prove increasingly difficult to strike.

China and the GCC

Global trends have given oil producers in the Gulf reason to desire a greater role for China in the Middle East. In part, the interest in China

stems from insecurity about US intentions, especially with visible US fatigue at the posture it has maintained in the Gulf for decades. Taken at face value, the language the United States and China have used to describe the region was pointedly different: the United States called for "energy independence" and "ending addiction" to Middle Eastern oil; Beijing advocated "energy interdependence," "energy security," and "strategic partnerships."[14] The United States' language makes Gulf leaders uneasy, while China's language makes them feel more secure.

The attraction of China is more than merely language, though. A return to more authoritarian patterns of governance could also help build Chinese ties in the Gulf. China and the GCC countries share a strong interest in preserving domestic stability and preventing spill-over from the Arab uprisings, and some suggest that part of Gulf Arab governments' attraction to China is an interest in the Chinese model of development amidst political stability.

Finally, many in the Gulf see China as the future, a rising power that will be consuming their oil for decades more. Some see the US relationship as something that can only diminish, while the relationship with China is something that will likely grow.

China and Iran

Like the GCC, Iran also hopes to pull China into the Middle East—albeit on the Iranian side. China's relationship with Iran is important, but it is also China's most difficult in the Middle East. The two countries share many interests, but Beijing also sees Tehran threatening its interests as well. While Iran has grown increasingly reliant on China that reliance has not been reciprocated.

Chinese-Iranian ties are deep. Their shared history dates back more than a millennium, and each former empire sees itself as much a civilisation as a country. With a common view that the international order intends to constrain their actions unfairly, each seeks a new order that allows it to achieve its rightful place in the world.[15] In the current environment, Iran is both an important source of Chinese energy, and also a power that distracts the United States from activity in other regions, particularly the Asia-Pacific.

An energy relationship with Iran has two principal benefits for China. The first is economic. Iran's share of China's oil imports has held relatively steady for the last decade, ranging between 9-14% and more recently trending at the lower end of that range. But because Iranian exports have

been declining overall, Iran's China trade has rocketed from 5-25% of its oil exports.[16] When global sanctions depress the demand for Iranian oil, China can obtain that oil at a discount. China is large enough to feel it is unlikely to be sanctioned by the United States, and it feels little obligation to sacrifice its own interests for US strategy. China takes a dim view of sanctions overall, so subverting them—especially when they are not imposed by the United Nations—seems the natural approach.

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Iran's other benefit to China is as a strategic hedge against US influence. That is to say, in the event of conflict between the United States and China, it behooves China to have energy relationships that the United States cannot turn on and off. Chinese strategists continue to worry out loud about the potential of Sino-American conflict over Taiwan, even as the Chinese-Taiwanese relationship grows increasingly close, and they fear that one of the first US steps in such an event would be to cut China's access to oil.

Yet China remains cautious toward Iran, for several reasons. First, Iran's estrangement from many countries—most pointedly the United States—brings great scrutiny to the Chinese-Iranian relationship and imposes costs on China that it would rather avoid. The vice-president of the China Institute of International Studies told an Arab researcher, "We never hear the US complaining about China's relationship with Saudi Arabia. But we hear them complain about Iran".[17] An Iranian scholar points out the problem from a Chinese perspective aptly: Chinese trade with Iran is a seemingly impressive USD 22-billion, but is less than one-fortieth of China's trade with its three largest trading partners: the United States, the European Union and Japan.[18] It is with these countries that China has a strategic imperative to manage its relations. Iran has also not positioned itself as a reliable supplier. In contrast to GCC leaders' sensitivities to market demands and client concerns, Iranian behaviour has been to threaten the stability of supply in order to deter attack, meanwhile presiding over a decline in actual production.

Conclusion

It is all but certain that China will have a larger role in the Middle East in the coming decades, but it will likely take on

such a role more slowly and cautiously than many in China and the Middle East would prefer, calibrating its movements so as not to jeopardise its bilateral relationships. A senior Chinese scholar of the Middle East put the Chinese balancing act well; he told an Arab researcher, "It would be the end of the world" he said, "if China had to choose between the United States, Saudi Arabia and Iran".[19] Still, Gulf powers see China as a source of leverage against one another and in their relations with the United States, regardless of whether that is how China sees itself.

China will not be able to avoid making hard decisions amidst the tangle of regional relations for a simple reason: there is no scenario in which China does not become increasingly reliant on the Middle East for energy over the next several decades. Some point to a potential spike in Chinese domestic energy production. Yet, China's limited efforts to expand development of its domestic energy resources face numerous technical obstacles, most importantly a shortage of the water that current technology requires to produce unconventional oil and gas.[20] While it remains possible that future technological developments will remove this hurdle, such advancement can be neither predicted nor guaranteed. Even so, it likely would not be enough. Movement out of oil into gas and other energy sources would take decades, and even shifting to natural gas as a transportation fuel would help China do little more than gain some leverage over domestic prices. Instead, China's increasing reliance on the Middle East for energy security is here to stay.

For China, the Middle East is complicated, it is conflictual, and it brings unwelcome scrutiny. This frustrating dynamic is especially evident in China's engaged but hamstrung posture towards Iran and its strategic yet underdeveloped alliance with Saudi Arabia. Still, China has no choice. Its growing influence in the region means that its actions—and inaction—will shape the Middle East more and more into the future. China will need to continue to balance its interests in the Middle East, and doing so will be an increasingly difficult task.

Endnotes

[1] Most males possess personal arms in the Sinai, as part of a patriarchal, tribal culture.

[2] See Human Rights Watch. "Egypt: Mass Arrests and Torture in Sinai." Vol. 17, no. 3 (February 2005), accessed at: http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/egypt0205.pdf.

[3] "Ex-minister suspected behind Alex church bombing". *Al-Arabiyya*, 7 February 2011, accessed at: http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/02/07/136723.html.

[4] John Esposito (2000), *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, New York, NYU Press, p.2.

[5] Charles D. Smith, "Secularism", in John Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 4, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 21.

[6] John Esposito (2000), *idem*, p. 13.

[7] "Going the Distance: on and off the road with Barack Obama", *The New Yorker*, 27 January 2014, accessed at: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2014/01/27/140127fa_fact_remnick?currentPage=all.

[8] "Al-Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt", Tom Joscelyn's testimony at Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, 11 February 2014, accessed at: http://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20140211/101734/HHRG-113-HM05-Wstate-JoscelynT-20140211.pdf.

[9] Pre-2008 networks and locations Al-Qaeda in the Far East (Indonesia and the Philippines); Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; Al-Qaeda in Pakistan; Al-Qaeda in East Africa (al Shabaab); Al-Qaeda in Iraq; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Algeria) and, Al-Qaeda in Europe. Since 2008, Al-Qaeda has expanded to Sudan (Al-Qaeda in the Two Niles); Tunisia (Ansar al-Sharia); Lebanon; Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria (AQIM); Syria (Jabhat al-Nusra and associated groups); and, North America (eg, the 2009 suicide bomb plot to attack the New York City subway system and the 2013 plot to attack trains in Canada).

[10] "Can we declare the war on al Qaeda over?" Foreign Policy, 27 June 2012, accessed at: http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/06/27/can_we_declare_the_war_on_al_qaeda_over.

[11] "Speech at Meeting of the Permanent Representatives of the League of Arab States", Russian Presidential Executive Office, 23 June 2009, accessed at: http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/10229.

[12] "Russia and the Arab Spring", Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., 3 April 2012, accessed at: http://www.mei.edu/content/russia-and-arab-spring.

[13] "Russia Considers Saudi Angle in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 5 August 2013, accessed at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/russia-benefit-syria-policy-iran.html#.

[14] Khalid R Al-Rodhan, *China's Strategic Posture in the Gulf, 1980-2010*, PhD Dissertation, Girton College, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 250.

[15] One author points out that while both countries are revisionist powers with regard to the international system, they are at odds because Iran is a revolutionary revisionist power intent on bringing down the existing international order while China is a reformist revisionist power that seeks to enhance China's position in that order. See Mohsen Shariantnia (2011), "Iran-China Relations: An overview of critical factors," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, no. 4, p. 64.

[16] Marybeth Davis, et al. (2012), "China-Iran: A Limited Partnership," *Prepared for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, Arlington, VA, CENTRA Technology, p. 19.

[17] *Op. cit.*, Mohsen Shariantnia, p. 75.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Op. cit., Khalid R Al-Rodhan, p. 115.

[20] "China set to triple unconventional gas supply amid price rise," Bloomberg, 16 July 2013, accessed at: http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-07-16/china-set-to-triple-unconventional-gas-supply-amid-price-rise.html.